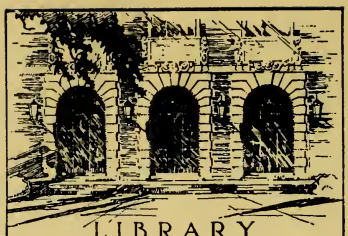

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MARY BROWNE

BY

L. E. WILTON

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1880

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MARY BROWNE.

CHAPTER XVI.

In two or three days from the date of my arrival at Mrs. Gray's I had decided upon the method I would adopt to obtain employment. This was to write short notices of my age, qualifications, &c., and get the neighbouring tradespeople to place them in their windows. In a short time I had acted upon this idea, and about a dozen of these advertisements stared me in the face from different shops whenever I went out. I had, at first, great hopes of the success of this scheme, but, as the days passed on, and a week went by, then a fortnight, without any applications for my services, I began to lose

heart, and it became evident to me that some other means must be thought of to gain what I so much desired. Yet another week, trying to hope against hope. My little stock of money was now fast dwindling away; so fast that, like most novices in my position, I could not understand how it went, considering the economy I observed. To make it last longer, I put myself on a much smaller allowance of daily food than I had hitherto permitted myself, for what to do when it should entirely disappear I knew not. In spite of my efforts, I could devise no other practicable course for obtaining employment than that which I had already adopted; and another three weeks passed, this time of half-starvation, as well as growing despondency, and still the desired end seemed no nearer.

I resolved at length to confide my troubles to Mrs. Gray (who, by the way, had been for some time past anxious about my health, thinking, as I wished her to do, that illness deprived me of appetite), and ask her what

she thought would be the best course for me to take. I knew her, though uneducated, to be intelligent and straightforward, and was sure of obtaining from her disinterested, if not valuable advice.

'I tell you what you'd better do, Miss,' she said, when my difficulties had been fairly stated to her; 'the very best thing is to advertise in the "Times" newspaper.'

This had been one of my impracticable schemes. The chance of failure, and the expense, had daunted me at once.

'It takes so much money,' I urged.

'Yes, but then you're nearly certain to get what you want. You're almost certain to find *something*, at all events.'

Thanking her warmly for her advice, I said I would think of it; and, although I found it would, probably, cost me more than one half of what remained of my riches, I, at length, resolved upon the speculation. I might have decided upon it earlier, but till Mrs. Gray had given me such great hopes of

its success, I thought it would be sure to fail.

The advertisement appeared in due time, and two letters in consequence were put into my hands. I shall never forget my feeling of disappointment upon opening them, and finding that they were merely requests for permission to insert my advertisement in local papers, at a moderate charge. Another week passed by, I had no more answers. I was in despair—and penniless.

It would answer no purpose to enlarge here upon the contending feelings which beset me in this great distress. The promise I had given to Mr. Harrop came often to my mind, but the very thought of performing it filled me with a kind of shame which made me shrink from keeping my word to him. 'At all events,' I said, 'I ought not to do so until every other resource has failed,' which, as yet, was not the case, as I had still my ring and ear-rings. These, after bracing up my courage, I sold, as old gold, to my friend,

Mr. Braddon; and, when the proceeds were exhausted (which was very soon indeed, for I received but fifteen shillings for them, and that after some bargaining), I provided for the wants of each day by disposing of anything I had that was saleable, at a shop near, the owners of which professed willingness to purchase any and every article of every-day use. I even sold the scanty amount of clothing I possessed that was not wanted for immediate use, consisting of my winter jacket and bonnet, a few under-garments, &c. until, at last, I was left with little more than the dress I wore daily.

It is strange that, even in this extremity, I never once regretted leaving the College. Brighter days *could* dawn now, but, had I remained there—I still continued to think—all would have been dark for ever. Hope still, at times, sustained me.

'But what can I do?' I asked myself. 'What can I do to change this hope into reality?'

But at length my feelings began to change thoroughly. Even hope itself seemed finally to depart. A kind of dull indifference settled upon me, like that which I had experienced in the old college-days, during the lonely vacations. I forgot to think of the future. Provision for the moment was my only anxiety; and even that at length ceased to interest me much. As long as I could pay my rent, which was a very small amount, and get sufficient food to prevent myself feeling absolutely faint, I cared for nothing else. I continued to affect delicate health to Mrs. Gray, as an excuse for nearly starving myself. It was like the utter darkness of despair. But, luckily for me, it was but the darkness which so often precedes the dawn of better things.

One evening upon re-entering the little cottage, after laying out to the best advantage a few pence, which I had obtained for a very old pair of boots, I noticed an expression on Mrs. Gray's face as she opened the door to

me, which seemed to raise in me, instantly, some of the dead hope of the past. 'What has happened?' I exclaimed, without giving her time to be the first speaker.

'There's been a gentleman here, Miss, asking for you.'

'A gentleman!' I exclaimed; 'I don't know one. I don't know anybody.'

'He didn't seem to want to see you, Miss, for he would not come in, though I told him you might be home any minute. "It is not necessary for me to wait," he said; "I only wished to make quite certain that the young lady was still with you. As she is so, please to give her this note." And it's on the table, Miss.'

How blind I had been not to know at once who it was—who it must be!

'Thank you,' I said, as I passed her, and hurried into the parlour. 'I dare say it's nothing of much consequence.'

'I hope it's some good luck, Miss, that's all,' said the kind old woman.

I closed the door, took the note from the table, and looked at it. Then I sat down, holding it in my hand—still watching it—thinking of it. Raising my eyes, I caught a glimpse in the glass of a face so changed by some strong emotion, that I scarcely knew it for my own. Turning away with a kind of wonder, I again examined the letter.

It seemed to me as though the handwriting were familiar, though I had certainly never seen it before. 'How strange it is of me not to open and read it!' I said to myself. Then I broke the seal, and took out the contents of the envelope.

There were two enclosures. The first I opened was a short note. There is no necessity now to take it from my desk to transcribe the exact words. I have never forgotten them since they first rested on my memory.

'My poor Child,—I saw your little advertisement in the "Times" the other day,—and

I feel certain that whether it has proved successful or not, you must have cause now to keep your promise. It may be difficult to you to do so (though it should not be). I therefore consider it already done, and answer it as enclosed. I send this to you as a duty. You must take my word for it,—as it would take quires of paper to explain to you why I look upon the proceeding in that light. You can repay the loan at your leisure, when you are as rich as you hope to be; but must not show mistrust of me, by acting respecting it in a way which would cause me more pain than is even given me by my knowledge of your present condition. With every good wish for you—

'Very truly yours,

'CHARLES HARROP.'

I opened the remaining enclosure. It was a bank-note for twenty pounds.

Although I knew at once that I should keep it—that is—keep it as a loan to be re-

paid at some happier time—yet, the mere possession of it as a means of warding off any return of the sufferings of the past, brought me neither joy nor satisfaction at the moment. The one thought of the goodness and kindness of the sender excluded every other, and made me, for the time, indifferent to all else. Oddly enough, no sense of humiliation came over me, no idea that I was under a great obligation to him. Whether it was his gentle way of tendering assistance or the result of the suffering I had endured, I know not, but I know that the false pride which had formerly risen in my heart at Marion Launceston's former offers of aid, now lay dormant, as though lifeless. It may be that I felt that the hour of repayment would soon come, or more likely still, some scarcely comprehended feeling towards the lender, changed the pain of the debt into a pleasure. With a quiet sense of happiness—such happiness as I had never before experienced, I placed the note in my bosom; feeling as

if it were sacred, and my touch profanity. And so another link was added to the chain!

I sat so long by the window, thinking vaguely—dreaming as only girlhood dreams—weaving bright fancies—building castles with no foundation whatever—that the night closed in and still found me motionless—cherishing a strange great hope, which, even then I saw plainly, was shadowed with a greater despair. At length I roused myself, took a sheet of paper from my little desk, lighted the gas, and, with a trembling hand, wrote as follows—

'Dear Sir,—I scarcely know what to say to you in answer to your kind note, nor how to thank you for your great goodness to me. I should indeed have kept my promise, but the time had not quite arrived for me to do so, though I fear it was very near. I can only say that I thank you very, very much, from my heart—remaining,

'Gratefully yours,

'MARY BROWNE'

I put this note into an envelope, directed it, and ran out and posted it at once.

It is said that when ill-fortune once leaves us it is slow to return; and, when good-fortune appears, it is loath to depart. So it was in my case. A few days after the receipt of my kind friend's letter, an event happened for which I had long given up hoping. A lady, having seen my advertisement in a shop-window, called at Mrs. Gray's to see me.

One interview decided the matter. She was a Mrs. Wilmot and resided in a country-town some distance from London. I agreed to be ready to accompany her home in a few days, accepting the position of Governess in her family. To my great relief, she told me that she had no time to call at the College to obtain confirmation of my statements as to the events of my past life, and my qualifications for the position I sought to fill; and with regard to writing to Miss Grimshaw, which I suggested, she simply said 'she couldn't be troubled.'

When my new friend had departed, I still felt nervous for a time, for fear she should eventually change her mind, and favour Miss Grimshaw with a visit, as such a step on her part might, I felt, end in the cancelling of my engagement. But a day or two passed, and hearing nothing adverse to my hopes, I took encouragement, and continued to busy myself with a lighter heart with my preparations for a new life.

I must not, however, forget to mention that, upon feeling comparatively sure of my destiny, I again wrote to Mr. Harrop, thinking he would be pleased to hear of my success. Certainly his letter to me had contained no expressed wish on the subject, but that, I argued, was possibly because he imagined the consummation of my hopes to be far distant. This was my letter.

'Dear Mr. Harrop,—You will be surprised to hear from me again so soon, but I write because I think you will be pleased to

know what I have to tell you. I have met with an engagement as Governess. It is with a lady named "Wilmot," who resides at W—— (here I gave the full address), and I have undertaken to educate her two little girls. She is to give me 25*l.* a year, and I think I shall be happy, as she seems good and amiable. I send you back half the money you so kindly lent me—the other half will more than suffice for my present necessities, and I have no doubt it will soon be in my power to remit that to you also. Once more thanking you for your goodness,

'Believe me,

'Ever yours gratefully,

'MARY BROWNE.'

I posted this letter with my own hands, as I had done the former one. There was some slight expectation in my mind of an answer to it, and for the few days preceding my departure to my new home, I listened continually for the postman's knock, the sound of it

always bringing a hope that my wish was, at length, realised. But no letter for me came. It never once struck me as strange that I received no acknowledgment of the receipt of the money. 'Perhaps,' I thought, 'he thinks it best not to write again. He thinks it unnecessary. If so, he is, doubtless, quite right. He knows, better than myself, how to act.' Then a kind of shame possessed me that I had acquainted him with all my affairs, when he had expressed no wish to hear of them. Perhaps he considered it presumption on my part, and silence was his method of teaching me my mistake. This idea filled me with confusion: the bitter suspicion that I was thought ill of by the person whose opinion I most valued, made me wretched. It was my own fault, however, in any case, and there was no means of remedying things, so I submitted as patiently as possible; wondering, however, why a combination of circumstances so apparently trivial should

give me pain, tenfold more real and lasting than that which any positive trouble of my life had ever caused me. So little did I understand my own mistaken feelings.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE day my new life was to commence, Mrs. Wilmot called for me, as she had promised to do, at an early hour. I thanked my landlady for all the kindness she had shown me, and the poor old creature wished me good-bye with her eyes full of tears. Though sorry for the moment to leave her, my thoughts were too much occupied with the future to leave room for much regret. The natural hopefulness of youth painted everything for me in the fairest colours, and I looked forward with the pleasantest feelings to a life which other girls, more happily circumstanced than myself, would have pictured as little short of slavery. My new friend and myself were soon comfortably seated in a first-class railway carriage, and our somewhat long

journey was quickly completed. By nine o'clock that night my box was once more unpacked, my worldly possessions arranged, and I was ready and eager for the morning, to commence the regular routine of my new duties.

I will not enter into the particulars of my life at Mrs. Wilmot's, as such details would prove uninteresting to my readers, and are certainly of no importance to the interest of my story. Suffice it to say that my life was on a par with that of most resident governesses in middle-class families. The establishment was large, and conducted on a most expensive scale. This ensured me many comforts and conveniences which I, doubtless, should not otherwise have enjoyed; but, at the same time, prevented my being in the society of Mrs. Wilmot as much as I had hoped and expected to be. This was a great disappointment to me, for she was an intelligent and well-educated woman, naturally gentle and kind-hearted, and in all her dealings and

communications with me showed a consideration for my feelings and a desire for my comfort which won my esteem and affection. She frequently expressed to me a hope that I 'felt at home,' and had everything I required; sometimes sending to my room little quaint notes asking me if all my wishes were gratified, and entreating me, if this were not the case, to take any means I pleased to remedy the defect. These notes were generally accompanied by several books which the writer assured me she had selected for my especial reading, and usually arrived when she had been rising late for several mornings, and spending the evenings away from home, or with company in her drawing-rooms. When she indulged herself in this way, she never even saw her children, except for a moment before she retired for the night, when they were asleep, and myself not present.

In recalling this lady's character to my mind after the lapse of many years, I am

astonished that I was not at the time as strongly impressed with its strange inconsistencies as I am now in my retrospection of it. When I recollect that for days, sometimes for even weeks together, she never once talked with either of her little ones—never seeing them except as just described—I am surprised that the inconsistency of such a course, with the gentleness and affection she displayed in her words and actions when actually in contact with them, and her kind consideration and care for all around her, never struck me at all during my residence with her. The only explanation I can find of her conduct is this:—She was not in any way wanting in that kind of affection which rejoices in the well-being of its object; but was singularly deficient in the power of deriving pleasure from the proximity or society of that object. She seemed to have a general love for all she met, to be never weary of lavishing gifts upon them, and interesting herself in their happiness; and

she acted towards her children as towards everybody else: only, as her love for them was naturally stronger than any other love, so her desire and efforts for their happiness were proportionately greater. But as for pleasure in having them near her, she seemed to have no more joy in it than if she were not their mother.

'I like you very much, my dear,' she would sometimes say to me, if we happened to meet on the stairs:—'I like you very much because you interest yourself in those dear little pets, and have them so much with you. It is my greatest happiness to know they are properly attended to; I really ought to see them, though; it's a duty. Bring them down for a few minutes.'

Upon my doing so, she would welcome them most affectionately; the warmth of her embrace being a perfect contrast to the coolness with which a few moments before she had expressed her desire to perform her 'duty,' and the indifference with which she

would resign their society a short time after their entrance; not, however, without a strict commission to me to see that they were well cared for, and extravagant expressions of pleasure at finding them looking healthy and contented.

'Take care of yourself, too, my dear,' she would very likely add. 'Nothing pleases me so much as to know that people are happy. If there is anything you wish for that you have not already, order one of the servants to get it. I will send you some of Mudie's books' (or anything else she happened to think of) 'to amuse you. Now go with Miss Browne, my dears, and be happy.'

And the 'dears' would go with Miss Browne, and be as happy and contented without their mother as she was without them. In fact, they were both as amiable as she was herself, and possessed in embryo the same contradictions of temperament, though they were scarcely perceptible at their early age. Without any exception,

I never met with more tractable children. The whole time I was with them I can safely say they never wilfully annoyed me, or gave trouble to me in any way. If they quarrelled between themselves, it was but to be reconciled the next moment, with tears of remorse for having been unkind to each other. It was as impossible to help loving them as it was to help loving their mother; and I doubt not, by this time, they have both fully developed the idiosyncrasies with which she was characterised.

How quietly those years passed! I saw little society, as my evenings were almost invariably spent in the study (which was a handsome well-furnished room), reading aloud to the children as they worked. I remember they employed themselves principally in knitting bright blue woollen garters, which were presented, when completed, with great formality, to different friends of their mamma. They never did any other fancy work while I was with them. I have a pair of these famous

garters to this very day. I laid them by as a remembrance of the pretty little hands that knitted them. When the dear little girls had retired to bed with their nurse, I usually amused myself with the piano and my books till ten o'clock; when after a choice little supper, which was always provided for me, I also went off to rest, to sleep calmly, and wake in the morning refreshed, and ready for my light and pleasant duties. There were occasional variations of these quiet nights. Either the children had some little friend to tea in the school-room, or their mamma sent for them and their governess, to pass an hour in the society of herself and her visitors. But these latter occasions were rare, and, I fear, not greatly appreciated by anyone concerned.

I remained with Mrs. Wilmot more than three years. Nothing happened during that time to break the monotony of my life; and, at length, the once vivid college days seemed to me like a dream, and all their associations dim and unreal.

I often wondered what had become of Marion Launceston; whether she had not cared to resume our neglected correspondence,—or whether she had, in some way, lost all clue to me, as I had to her. Sometimes I feared the former—as she could easily, I thought, have obtained my address from Mr. Harrop (forgetting that it was not likely she would imagine he knew it). Yet how unlike all my past knowledge of her character seemed a settled indifference to one whom she had once looked upon as a friend!

But again I thought, 'She cannot have written to the College since I left, thinking I might still be there, or Mr. Harrop would certainly have had the letter forwarded—unless, indeed, Miss Grimshaw quietly transferred it from the letter-box to the fire, which would be most likely.' This last idea—namely, that my old enemy had destroyed that which I would have given anything to receive—soon grew in my mind into a certainty. This

belief soothed and calmed me, by giving me a strong and entire faith in the constancy of my friend; yet at the same time filled my heart with sorrow at the possibility of her thinking that I myself was indifferent to her. 'After all,' I would sometimes say, 'what does it matter? I should, most likely, under any circumstances, never again have actually seen her, and it is not much worse as it is.'

At other moments a miserable fear would oppress me. It seemed as though my former conclusion was groundless, and my friend had really forgotten me. Even after the lapse of years this idea would occasionally give me intense pain, such pain as we all feel when we realise that a once dear friend whom we still love is yet living—breathing—moving—the same in all but love for us—and, in that changed for ever!

As the years went by, however, though that one joy of being with the friend of my girlhood seemed destined to be mine no more, some vague hope of a future, when

another happiness of the past might again become a thing of the present, another happiness still dearer to me than any renewal of my school-girl friendship could ever be, might dawn for me, would occasionally fill my heart. But, though this hope had no foundation, though it was but a shadow with which my foolish mind was cheated into a semblance of joy, yet at times it grew strong and vivid, and filled me for days together with an inexpressible feeling of calmness and content. Who can account for the singular confidence it is sometimes given to us to feel, in the realisation of some dear wish, some earnest strong desire? There may be no ground—no slightest reason, for hope—in truth, all reason may be against it, all probabilities in direct opposition to it—yet, without cause for trust, the confidence in, nay the positive certainty of, its realisation is as strong upon us as though the faith were already changed to sight. I felt sure that in some future, however distant, I should

see and hold converse with my other friend again!

I acquired much knowledge in those few years; much book-knowledge, I mean, not that of human nature, and what is commonly denominated 'the ways of the world.' I had every facility for reading and study. The library was well-stocked, and I had the privilege of selecting any volume I pleased. Shakspeare and Milton became familiar to me, as well as the lighter and more modern poets. I perused novels in abundance of every kind and date (the latest works of that class being supplied by Mudie's to Mrs. Wilmot, and sent up to me second-hand), with a mixture of history, travels, and sciences of various descriptions, till I possessed a confused mass of knowledge, in fact knew a little of most things, and a great deal of—nothing.

Many years would have passed before, of my own accord, I should have left the quiet home I had found. No longing ever rose in

my mind for a more exciting life. Not positively discontented for the moment, I felt no desire to risk losing that which I had already gained, for the sake of perhaps eventually obtaining a better position, and more extensive sources of gratification. I would willingly have remained with my eccentric but kind-hearted employer, until her children required a more accomplished governess than myself; but Fate ordered otherwise.

One morning, when the last quarter of the third year of my stay was just completed, Mrs. Wilmot sent for me, during study hours, to pay me the salary due to me. This was her usual custom; the whole of the transaction, as a rule, occupying her about three minutes, including enquiries after the children, and expressions of sincere thanks to myself for giving them so much of my attention. On this particular occasion the ordinary business was completed in even a still shorter space of time: 'You see, I'm in a hurry to-

day,' said my friend, 'because I've something extra to say to you. The truth is, my dear, that though I regret to take the children from you, or inconvenience you in any way, I have to tell you that, early next week, the sweet little lambs are going to boarding-school; and all I ask of you is, to break it to them, for me, in as calm a manner as possible.' I looked at her in undisguised astonishment.

'Ah! I thought you would be surprised. The fact is, so am I too—as yet—as I only made up my mind yesterday to the cause for sending them; and that is, that I am about to marry again.'

'Indeed!' I said, not knowing what else to say.

'Yes, I've quite decided upon it; so nothing remains for the dear ones but to be sent away, as I shall no longer be able to give them the attention they have hitherto received from me; and without the immediate care of a mother, I believe it best for children to be

entirely separated from her. I am quite right in this, I know, so there is no alternative. It breaks my heart, but still it must be done.'

She paused with the tears in her eyes, while I stood silent, wondering more and more at her entertaining such a singular delusion, as that she was of the slightest practical importance to the happiness or comfort of my poor little pupils. But, probably, most of us delude ourselves as strangely, in some particulars, as this lady did in this.

'It is awkward for me,' I said at last, after some vague idea of appealing against my separation from the children had crossed my mind, to be dismissed the next moment as a hopeless proceeding—'It is very awkward for me, as I shall have great difficulty in obtaining another engagement within the time you mention; in fact, when I think of it, I have no hope of doing so.'

'Oh! my dear, I give you a quarter's notice, and a quarter's salary, of course. As

for staying here, you can do that as long as you please—a year if you like. Only I must send the children away.'

'I do not like to stay here with nothing to do.' Then with an effort, for even before I made it, I felt quite certain the request would be futile—'Could you not trust the little ones entirely to my charge for the ensuing quarter? I would take every care of them, and in the meantime should most likely succeed in obtaining another situation. It would be more satisfactory to me if you would do this.'

She shook her head sadly.

'You see, I should always be uneasy if I did so. Having made up my mind that they *must* go to school, I feel half the pain will be over when they are once happily settled down. In fact, I should not like to enter upon my second marriage, with the parting from them hanging over me. Besides, the house is going to be thoroughly renovated, and the smell of the paint would be extremely prejudicial to their

health. Therefore, as I said before, there is no alternative, only I do hope, my dear, that you will make yourself comfortable here as long as ever you like. Your rooms will not be wanted, and you can live in them like the princess in the fairy tale.'

'Thank you,' I said; 'you are very, very kind. It will be a great advantage to me to stay till I meet with an engagement, and I will gladly do so.'

'That's right, my child. I am glad to see you take the necessary trials of life calmly. It is always my endeavour to do the same; but, at times, I find it difficult. You evidently succeed better than myself, but that's because your nature is stronger than mine. Now, don't let me detain you any longer. The children need not continue their studies after to-day, and not to-day if you prefer a holiday.'

'Thank you,' I said; 'I shall never forget how good you have been to me since I have been here.'

'Not at all. It is I who am indebted to you, for taking such care of my dear ones. I can never be sufficiently grateful. Now go, and try to forget your troubles.'

At this point she took up a book as if to commence reading, so there was no resource for me but to leave her, which, I now recollected, she had already distinctly bidden me to do. But it was with a sad heart that I went from the room, and a dismal conviction that one of the happiest periods of my life was gone for ever.

When the children heard the news, which I thought it best to communicate to them at once, there was a violent burst of grief which lasted about seven minutes. At the end of this time, they became so full of *my* trouble, that they appeared to think no more of their own. For the remainder of the day (and, in fact, for the whole week preceding their departure), they never once, in my presence, dwelt upon the sorrow they themselves were called upon to bear. All their anxiety was

about their 'dear, kind Brownie,' and what she would do without them.

'I never knew mamma to refuse a moderate request before,' remarked my eldest pupil one evening, after severe cogitation. 'She must have a very good reason for not letting us stay with you this quarter, Miss Browne.' My poor little friend little guessed then the true motive for her mother's decision.

I went to sleep that night, thinking that it is wisest to check, in its first growth, all strong affection for any human creature. The bitterness of separation seemed to my experience such a certain consequence of love, that I resolved to struggle hard, for the future, to live to myself; to keep my heart safe from any attachment; to guard myself from endeavouring to supply adopted ties in place of those natural ones which it had pleased God, in my case, to break so early, 'and then,' I said to myself, 'they can never be broken thus ruthlessly a second time.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE week slipped quietly away. The poor children went off to school in a storm of sobs and tears, and I was left alone to plan for the future. For the first few days after their departure I could do nothing but regret the absence of my two little companions, but the necessity for immediate action at length softened my grief, and I began in earnest, as my friend Ellen Murray would have expressed it, 'to keep my eyes open' a second time.

The wedding of Mrs. Wilmot was, I heard, to take place speedily. The house was plunged at once into a state of paint, and whitewash, and paper-hanging, very destructive to the personal comfort of the inmates. It was, perhaps, natural for me to

feel anxious to escape before the ceremony actually took place ; for, whatever Mrs. Wilmot might say to the contrary, I felt intuitively that I should be in the way if I remained. Not in *her* way, certainly, for she never made troubles ; and beyond endeavouring to ascertain that I wanted for nothing, there was no fear of her concerning herself about me. But the servants were all so busy, and their heads so full of the approaching festivities, that some of them did not hesitate to show me, by their neglect and altered manner, that they considered me an interloper ; and not only an interloper, but one who had no business to want to be waited upon. Not choosing to conciliate them by ministering to my own wants, I had in consequence to endure the annoyance of occasionally hearing half-whispered remarks about ' young women who thought themselves ladies, poor things, but wasn't no better than servants, coming into people's houses to be run about for, and doing nothing

for their food but read books, as if other people hadn't enough to do without tramping up and down stairs all day after *them*,' &c., &c.

This and similar troubles I tried to consider beneath my notice, but they had their bitterness, forcing me to realise the dependence of my position, bringing back to me the memory of days when no thought entered my mind of my ever being called upon to suffer such petty mortifications. They had their good fruit, however, in counteracting my natural inactivity, and giving me an eager desire to leave the house before the forthcoming ceremony should actually take place. Accordingly, when I had once made up my mind what course to take, I lost no time in putting my designs into execution.

In the first place I decided upon again advertising in the 'Times.' There was no need this time to count over my money to see if I could possibly dare to venture on such an expensive step; for, thanks to the

careful provision which Mrs. Wilmot had always made for my wants, I had now three times as many pounds as on a former occasion I had had shillings. The residue of my debt to Mr. Harrop had long since been paid. I forgot to mention this circumstance before, but at the end of my first year at Mrs. Wilmot's, I sent him a Post-office Order for the amount. Mrs. Wilmot kindly procured it for me in one of her drives, the nearest post-town being a long distance from her residence. Enclosed with it was a short note to my creditor, thanking him for his kindness, and expressing a hope that he would receive this, and had also received my former remittance safely. No acknowledgment from him had ever arrived. I had certainly, in spite of former circumstances, fully expected a few lines from him, just to say that the money had been received, but they never came. My address in full had been placed at the head of my letter, so that it should be, I said to myself, returned to

me in case of its not reaching its destination safely ; therefore, I concluded, in the absence of its re-appearance, that it had done so ; and for some inexplicable—at least to me inexplicable—reason, its receiver had thought proper to make no reply. It all seemed to puzzle me for a time, but I soon gave up thinking about it ; the possibility of my communication having miscarried, or any other unforeseen circumstance having prevented its delivery to the person to whom it was addressed, never once entering my mind. To return to my immediate business.

The advertisement once decided upon was soon penned, forwarded to the 'Times' Office, and introduced to the public. How eagerly I waited for answers ! To my great joy and astonishment, in the course of a few days upwards of a dozen had arrived. Two of these were circulars from the offices of Governess Agents, the others were *bonâ-fide* replies. Some, however, of even these communications were useless, except as illustra-

tive of the opinion held by a certain section of English people as to the value of education. I will quote the contents of a few.

One lady wished to engage me to instruct her own immediate family, consisting of four boys and four girls, between the ages of fourteen and three (another little boy under two occasionally gracing the schoolroom with his presence) in every branch of education with which I was acquainted—in everything, in fact, which it was possible for me to teach, and for them to learn, and in some few things also impossible to both parties. This lady 'had been accustomed to giving her governess 20*l.* a year, exclusive of laundry expenses. Should this meet my views, she would be happy to hear from me.'

My 'views,' however, though certainly not immoderate, were not quite so limited as this; consequently she did *not* have the happiness of hearing from me.

Another lady expressed herself as anxious to engage my services to take the entire

charge, educational and otherwise, of three children, all under ten years of age; one of whom was, unfortunately, of weak intellect. I was to sleep in the same room with these poor little beings, wash and dress, walk out with them; mend, and occasionally make their clothes; and consider their welfare in all things. I was to instruct them promiscuously in English, French, music, singing, drawing, the use of the globes, the rudiments of Latin, and dancing; the child of weak intellect included; who, while the mother was speaking on the subject, she thought it best to mention, required a great deal of care and personal attention. This lady had also been 'in the habit of giving her governess 20*l.* a year; but in consideration of the child of weak intellect,' (whom she appeared to want to get entirely off her hands) 'she would not object to giving 25*l.*;' with the distinct understanding, however, that the person who received such a fabulous stipend 'must be a lady by birth and manners, such as her

employer would not be ashamed of seeing her children emulate and copy. As this point was one absolutely necessary to be attained —that is, the securing a *perfect lady* to fill the situation—perhaps Miss Browne would not object to take a short journey to the writer's residence' (which, by the way, was only rather more than one hundred and twenty miles from the place where Miss Browne was then located), 'when she would be happy to speak to her on the subject; and, in the event of an engagement being entered into, would willingly agree to defray one half of the expense of the journey.'

From this generous offer I concluded that, in the event of an engagement *not* being entered into, Miss Browne would be expected to defray the two halves of the expense herself. In any case, I did not feel inclined to take the journey in question.

Another lady wished me to instruct her two daughters, aged respectively thirteen and eight years, in 'English and French

thoroughly, with first-class music and drawing; the latter in various styles.' This lady 'did not feel inclined to engage an expensive governess, consequently, her salary would be merely nominal.' She offered me '10*l.* a year and lessons on the organ,' as a compensation for my services. I could not help laughing as I put this effusion into the fire.

The only letter I really considered it worth my while to answer was of a different character from these and others I received. It was written in a bold, decisive hand, which, I recollect, gave me the idea that the writer was a pompous, middle-aged woman, with a double chin. As I examined this writing, it seemed to me that I had seen some so much like it on some previous occasion, that I almost recognised it as familiar. In vain I puzzled my brain to discover whose hand it resembled so closely. It was useless, and, at last, wearied with the effort, I gave it up in despair; trying to persuade myself that I was the victim of an idle fancy, and that I had

never really seen any very much like it before.

The epistle ran as follows :—

'The Laurels, Seaford.

'Mrs. Chanter is seeking a governess to instruct her two daughters (ten, and eight years of age) in English thoroughly, with French, and good music ; and her son, aged nine, in English, and the rudiments of Latin. The advertiser is requested to address as above, stating her age, references, and the salary she requires.'

There was a curtness about this letter which, in itself, appeared uninviting, as not, to my imagination, auguring well for my domestic comfort, should I ever reside with the writer. However, there was nothing really to justify any hesitation in answering it ; so I wrote in reply at once, though with very little expectation, and no wish, that my correspondent would favour me with a second communication. My note dismissed, the matter

passed from my mind, and I tried to decide what step it would be best to take next, having confused ideas of Governess Agencies. But I had calculated wrongly.

In two days' time, a second epistle arrived, in the same handwriting as the first, stating that 'Mrs. Chanter had written to Mrs. Wilmot to obtain her guarantee as to Miss Browne's qualifications, &c., and in the event of the answer proving satisfactory, Mrs. Chanter would again communicate with Miss Browne, in the hope that she would make it convenient to arrive at "The Laurels" at an early date.'

The conclusion of the matter was that in a few days I was very busy preparing for my journey to Seaford; only too glad at the prospect of escaping from Mrs. Wilmot's abode before her wedding should take place.

On the morning of my departure, she bade me farewell with her accustomed mixture of kindness and eccentricity. Having sent for me to her bedroom for the purpose

of going through the ceremony, she addressed me as follows:—

'Good-bye, my dear' (kissing me on both cheeks). 'I am so sorry to part with you, but am glad to know you are likely to be happy.' I am sure I did not know how she knew it. 'Here's a little keepsake for you,' putting a small box into my hand, 'not to be opened till you get to your destination, remember. I can never thank you sufficiently for all your kindness to my little ones. It's so dreadful to say "Good-bye" to those we love. Now, go, my dear,' kissing me again, 'or you'll miss your train.'

With this strange contradiction of regret at parting with me, and apparent anxiety to get rid of me—for there was, at least, a quarter-of-an-hour to spare before it would be necessary for me to leave the house—this really kind woman dismissed me with tears in my eyes. Remembering all her goodness and gentleness to me, I could not part with her without feeling that I should, most likely,

never again meet with one who would take so much interest in my welfare as she had done, nor without regret that it was impossible for me to make any return to her for her generosity. I stammered 'Good-bye,' and some expressions of thankfulness in answer to her remarks, but I doubt whether she understood my words, or even cared to hear them. As I was leaving the room, she called me back.

'Oh, my dear, I forgot to tell you that whenever you have any time to spare, I shall consider it most unkind if you do not devote it to a visit to me. I can't promise to be always with you, you know,'—with, I fancied, some slight consciousness that such a remark was ludicrously unnecessary,—'but still shall always welcome you as a dear friend. Do be quick and start, or I'm sure your train will be gone.'

'Thank you very much,' I said; 'I do hope I shall see you again—Good-bye—Good-bye.'

I was fairly crying by this time, but even while I spoke she moved her hand for me to go; and this time I departed without any return summons.

CHAPTER XIX.

It was early morning when I stepped into the carriage which Mrs. Wilmot had arranged should convey me to the railway station, and I should not arrive at my destination till late in the evening. Once seated, and the horses started, I looked round, and on the opposite side of the vehicle I saw a good-sized paper parcel with my name written upon it in pencil. Losing no time in opening it, I found it contained three books, with these words, also in pencil, scribbled on a piece of paper in Mrs. Wilmot's handwriting :—

'To be read on the journey. I dare say you have forgotten to provide yourself with any.'

I certainly had not once thought on the subject, and again felt how estimable was

this quality of thought for the wants of others which this lady possessed in such an extraordinary degree. She had even commissioned the coachman to be sure to stay and see me fairly off, in case of my coming to grief with my little boxes among the railway porters. The order was strictly obeyed, and all trouble and anxiety in this matter thus saved to me.

The journey passed off uneventfully, and I at length found myself and luggage on a country railway platform. Being the only specimen of humanity the train had disgorged at that particular spot, immediately on its departure I became an object of vivid interest to the presiding railway officials, consisting of a large porter and a small boy. After studying me for some seconds with an expression which seemed to say that he despaired of making me out, or discovering the place of my destination, by simply taking stock of my general appearance, the former condescended to take other means of at once

gratifying his curiosity and performing his duty. He advanced leisurely towards me, and asked in a polite tone if he should take my luggage to a fly.

'Thank you,' I said, after looking round in vain for anyone who might have been sent to meet me. 'I think I had better have a fly, but scarcely know how to direct the driver. I have never been here before. I want a house called "The Laurels," but do not know at all where it is.'

'If it's Mrs. Chanter's "Laurels" you mean, Miss—and I don't know of any other about — it's close here — only about ten minutes' walk down the road.'

'Yes—that's the name.'

'There's not a fly in just now, Miss'—this after putting his head out at the door of the station. 'I think you'd better walk, and I'll take your boxes for you.'

I hesitated a moment, not liking to make my entrance into my new home in such an undignified manner; but after a little re-

flection, at length decided upon ignoring the conveyance, and taking the advice of my new acquaintance.

'Yes, that will be best,' I said. 'I'll walk there, if you'll show me the house.'

'You can't miss it, Miss. It's the first large white house you come to on the right hand. It's got "The Laurels" written on the gates. You start off, and your boxes will be there soon after you, but I must wait till the next train's in.'

So I set off by myself, feeling already, in the loneliness of my arrival, the difference between my late and my present employer. The ten minutes lengthened into twenty before I saw in the distance the large white house to which I had been directed. It was pleasantly situated, with a carriage-drive in front. I opened the nearest gate and walked to the principal door. Then I knocked gently and modestly as became a poor little governess, and the small estimation in which, from the fact of not anyone having been sent

to meet me at the station, I imagined I must be held by the mistress of the house. My summons was answered at once by a man-servant.

'Is this Mrs. Chanter's?'

'Yes, Miss. Are you the new governess?'

Whether it was the question itself, or the tone of voice in which it was uttered, I know not; but I felt the blood rush to my face as I answered in the affirmative. Just then, a young woman, evidently a housemaid, came out of a room into the hall, and towards her went my examiner, leaving me standing at the still open entrance-door.

'Halice,' I heard him say in a loud whisper, 'this here's the new governess—Miss Browne—the young pusson as Missus said you wos to see. You're to tell her she can't see her hemployer to-night, along of the company.'

'Why didn't you let me know before, you silly?'

'Oh, them sort of things allers goes out

of my 'ed. I says "Yes, Mem," and I forgets all about 'em.'

'Halice' gave a loud 'Hush,' and shook her head, as if deprecating the raised tone of her fellow-servant; then, advancing to me, with a pretty assumption of belief that I had not heard a word of the late conversation, proceeded to give me a new and improved edition of the information I had just received.

'If you please, Miss, are you Miss Browne?'

I signified that I was Miss Browne.

'Missus sends her compliments, Miss, and she's engaged to-night, and she told me to show you to your room, and get you what you wanted. This way, please, Miss.'

She closed the street-door, and preceded me upstairs; the individual who had admitted me watching us ascend with a ludicrous mixture of commiseration and admiration on his face. The latter I concluded was

intended for my companion, the former for myself. Heart-sick and discouraged, though knowing I was scarcely justified in feeling so, as yet, I entered a good-sized room, the door of which my conductress had thrown open.

'This is the schoolroom, Miss; and this,' passing to the farther side of the room and opening another door, 'is your bedroom. If you like to go in and take off your things, I will run down while you do so and bring you up some tea or supper.'

'Thank you,' I said; 'I don't require anything. I am very tired and would rather go to bed at once.'

'The children didn't wait tea for you, Miss, as it was getting on to their bed-time. They're not asleep, though,' she added, laughing.

This was evident, for from the noise proceeding from a room near mine, I should have imagined that they had not only no intention of closing their eyes for some time to come, but that their number, as stated to me

by Mrs. Chanter, was multiplied by three at the least.

'Let me bring you a cup of tea, Miss, or a glass of wine.'

'Nothing, indeed, thank you.'

'Breakfast will be ready at eight, Miss, and I'll wake you in time to be up for it. The children are always in the schoolroom by that time.'

'Thank you,' I answered, scarcely heeding what she had said. 'Good-night.'

'Good-night, Miss. I hope you'll sleep well after your journey.'

She closed the door and left me, and I sat down on the side of my little bed, and buried my face in my hands.

The desolation and loneliness of such moments as I then spent, can be thoroughly understood only by those whose fate it has been to be situated as I was situated at that time. Bereft of all power of even endeavouring to shake off the depression which, as it were, crushed me, I sat motionless, nursing

my despondency. For the hundredth time in my life I felt bitterly the friendlessness of that life. 'I must be passed about the world like this,' I said, 'perhaps till I die; every word of kindness addressed to me being the fruit of chance or pity, not of tenderness and affection. Even if I love for a time, its objects are torn from me; even those who profess interest in me drive me from them to serve their own.' Manifestly, I was not in a healthy frame of mind. Probably had I accepted the cup of tea or glass of wine which had been offered me, with the accompaniment of some bread and meat, I should have seen things in a fairer light. 'There is no one in the whole world,' I continued, 'who cares whether I live or die, no one whose grief would not pass away in an hour were I to fall dead where I am sitting. No one——'

Just then I heard a door unfastened, evidently in a room near my own. The thread of thought was broken in a moment, and I

was listening eagerly, as though the opening of that door was an event in some way connected with myself.

One of those inexplicable feelings came over me which many people sometimes experience, it appears to them causelessly. A feeling as though some event particularly affecting their destinies was taking place. The feeling to me in this instance was also as though some long past and my actual present were being united; as though the whole of the time since I had left the college was a kind of parenthesis—if I may so express it—which did not belong to my life at all. Still I listened. A man's footstep sounded in the passage, passing a door in my bedroom—for the first time I perceived there were two doors in the room; though I afterwards learned that this particular one was fastened up—and crossing to the opposite side. Then it ceased suddenly; and as it ceased I heard a knocking, apparently at another door nearly opposite to the one at which the sound had commenced.

There was immediate silence in the place of the noisy prattle of the children, which since my arrival had not hitherto left off for a moment. Then a loud burst of laughter as the knocking was repeated, and a man's voice called out 'Good-night.' Then came confused outcries of 'Come in, uncle. It's only Uncle Charles. How you frightened us, you silly old fellow!' Then the door was opened, and I heard fresh shouts and fresh laughter for a few moments. Then it was again closed, and the same footstep sounded again till it died away in the distance.

I began to wonder now why I had listened so eagerly, and why I had for the moment felt such strong interest in such trifling events. 'Perhaps,' I said, 'it is because it is pleasant to me, lonely and desolate as I am, to hear the tones of affection and love, even though in such love and affection there is no place for me.' And then I recollected that I had listened more intently when the first door had been opened, than when

the voice had sounded and the children answered. And so I wondered again, and then dismissed the subject from my mind.

Whatever cause, however, had induced the singular feeling which had affected me, the current of my thoughts had been effectually changed by it. The bitter despair had taken to itself wings, and for the time, at least, flown away. No happiness took its place, but my fate began to seem easier to bear, and things in general not wholly irremediable. 'There may be brighter days in store for me,' I said, 'days even as bright as those of childhood.' And so—praying that it might be so—and that the great gift of Contentment, without which all other gifts are valueless, might in time be mine, I lay down to sleep—the noisy prattle of the children ceasing by degrees—and a man's tenor voice rising from some room below (in which I concluded Mrs. Chanter's evening party was assembled) falling sweetly on my ear, and haunting all my dreams through the long night, like the sound of an angel's song.

CHAPTER XX.

THE bright morning sun streaming through the window roused me from sleep. It was some moments before I could succeed in realising where I was, but when this was accomplished, I rose, and began to dress. As I did so, the promised summons came to the door, a ceremony totally unnecessary, considering the noise the children were making. The commotion was as great as it had been on the previous night. With a miserable feeling of discontent—my despondency, alas! had returned, and I had no heart to welcome the fair morning—I completed my toilette. I was about to leave the room, and was already turning the handle of my door, when my disengaged hand, wandering idly into the pocket of my dress, came into contact with the little

box, containing the keepsake Mrs. Wilmot had given me. It was still closed, and in the excitement and novelty of the time had been, till now, quite forgotten by its owner. With a feeling of tenderness for the giver, stronger than any I had ever before experienced for her, I opened it. To my astonishment and pleasure, I found it contained an exquisite little gold watch, and a thick, handsome chain.

They had evidently been selected specially as a gift for myself, for besides having the appearance of being quite new, my initials were engraved neatly on the back of the watch-case. My thoughts went back to the pleasant home I had left, and the almost motherly care of the giver of the gift. How much more fully we appreciate blessings lost than those which are still ours! 'If I only knew that Mrs. Chanter was such another woman as Mrs. Wilmot,' I said to myself, 'I could see some prospect of happiness; as it is, I must resign myself to my fate, and

bear, as best I can, whatever is in store for me.'

With this every-day philosophy, I replaced my treasure in its little box, and locked it up safely in my trunk, deciding that, at all events for the present, it was too good for me to wear. This effected, I wiped the tears from my eyes and entered the school-room.

Looking round, I saw that breakfast was already laid; three mugs of milk being placed on the table, each graced with a plateful of huge pieces of bread-and-butter; while the refreshment dedicated, I concluded, to my especial delectation was set a little apart at the head of the board. There was barely time to observe this, when the door opposite to that by which I had entered was thrown open, and in walked my new pupils.

'Good-morning, Miss Browne,' they exclaimed in chorus. This in the most natural and familiar tone, as if they had known me all their lives.

'Good-morning,' I answered, feeling, I must confess, rather at a disadvantage, in the face of such a multiplied instance of self-possession.

Without any further demonstration, however, the little people proceeded to take their places at the breakfast-table. When this ceremony was concluded, a young woman, evidently the nurse, who had ushered them into the room, and remained in attendance, probably with the object of seeing her charges seated, now quitted us, closing the door after her.

My young friends, in the meanwhile, commenced their breakfasts in profound silence; which, however, from the collected expression of their faces, it was easy to see was not the result of timidity or shyness. But whatever the cause might be, its effect was too much in accordance with my feelings for me to endeavour to break the charm; so I placed myself at the head of the table, and following the example of my companions, commenced operations without uttering a word. But the unexpected

bliss did not last long. I was roused by a quick, sudden shriek from one of the party.

'Oh! You wicked boy! I wonder you don't drop from your chair.'

'What have I done, eh? What are you squeaking about? Who's done anything, eh?'

'Oh! Miss Browne,' exclaimed the first speaker, who was evidently the younger of the two girls. 'Isn't he a dreadfully wicked, greedy boy? He's been and changed bread-and-butters.'

Not quite comprehending matters, I looked first at the excited face of the speaker, and then at her brother, who was seated next to her, and had now turned round in his chair facing his sister, with his teeth set and his fist raised threateningly.

'You split, and see what I'll give you.'

'What is all this about?' I said. 'I do not understand. What does it mean?'

'He's changed bread-and-butters, Miss Browne,' repeated my informant, evidently

not in the least alarmed at the raised fist. 'I was saving my crust till the last, and it had butter in all the holes, and while I was blowing my nose he took it out of my plate, and put in this dry little bit instead. And now he's eating it himself.'

I looked at the little boy. In his unclenched hand was a nicely-buttered crust, which he never attempted to hide, and of which several large bites had already been dispatched. The poor victim, as I now concluded her to be, had, however, barely ended her accusation in full, before she had ample cause to repent having made it; for her opponent brought his fist down heavily upon her face, and the blood gushed from the poor little nose that had been the mainspring of the disturbance.

'There now,' he exclaimed, as his sister screamed and started from her seat, and I rushed towards her probably, for the moment, more frightened than herself, 'you see what you've got. I told you you would; that will

punish you for telling stories, and teach your nose not to want to be blowed at breakfast-time.'

'You naughty, wicked boy,' I said, turning towards him with my handkerchief to the poor child's face. 'Are you not ashamed of being so unkind and cruel to your sister?'

'I'll serve you the same if you get interfering,' was the reply; and the little fist was again raised, this time in *my* face. I was too much surprised at the moment to do anything but look at him.

'Ah! I will,' he said. 'Women are always interfering—uncle says so. I'm glad I wasn't born a miserable, sneaking girl.'

'Don't mind him, Miss Browne,' said a fresh voice from the end of the table, which I perceived upon looking round belonged to my remaining pupil. 'He's such a rude, wicked boy that no one notices him, except mamma. He's too wicked for anybody to heed what he says. Oh! you naughty boy, Edward,' she added, shaking her head and

frowning at him. The fist was now transferred in her direction.

'It's not much trouble to come round,' said the owner; 'you'd better take care, you young interferer.'

The young interferer, however, seemed in no more terror of this threat than her sister had been of the former one, and continued her breakfast in silence. Too much astonished to decide at the moment what course it would be best to take, with regard to my treatment of the delinquent, I contented myself by merely leading the wounded party in dignified silence to my bedroom, where I attended to the needs of the damaged nose. We re-entered the schoolroom just in time to see Master Edward completing his sins by throwing the last morsel of the disputed crust into his mouth with an air of triumph. His injured sister looked at him steadily for a moment, and then resumed her seat and her breakfast in perfect silence. She was evidently of a most phlegmatic temperament, unless

roused by extraordinary provocation. No one spoke again till the meal was over, then I took the initiative.

'Edward,' I said, 'listen to me. I'm not going to punish you this time for behaving in such a shocking and cruel way to your sister, but I'm going to speak to you.'

'Very well, Browne. Continue.'

This with such an air of affected attention, with the head thrown back, and the voice modulated to the gravest tone, that in spite of my annoyance, and almost despair, I could scarcely resist laughing. However, I managed to control my face, and went on in the most serious style I could assume.

'It is very cowardly,' I said, 'it is *extremely* cowardly of a boy to strike a girl. You should be kind and loving to your sisters, not cruel and revengeful. It is only mean-spirited boys who do as you have just done. Good boys are polite to their sisters, and like to give up to them, and study their wishes. They never——'

'That's a good one,' he interrupted; 'you're quite wrong there, my dear, it's just the contrary. Men were made to rule over women, and make them do as they like. Uncle John used to say so, mamma says he did, and he was right. She says Aura and Nellie are to do what I want them to. When I'm a man, whenever a woman contradicts me, I'll be down upon her. Let her look out for herself! Now, Browne, go on; I'm listening.'

'I've nothing more to say to you, you naughty child,' I continued, utterly at a loss how to make any impression upon him. 'Only, if ever you strike, or behave badly to either of your sisters in my presence again, or perform such a mean action as you have done this morning, I will punish you severely.'

'Oh! Is that all? I thought you were coming out with something grand by taking such a time to begin. Did you say *you* would punish me?'

'Yes, *I* will punish you severely.'

'You'd get punished the worst in the end

if you attempted it, I can tell you. Mamma wouldn't let you touch *me*, and if you did it before she knew, I'd double you up like Tom Sayers, and you'd be awfully frightened. Girls always are. I'm precious glad I'm not a great big stupid of a girl.'

'Is he always like this?' I asked, turning to the elder of my other pupils.

'Mostly, Miss Browne, unless he's asleep,' she answered in an undertone. 'Mamma won't have him punished, at least she wouldn't when Miss Strong was here, and *she* left because of him; he was so rude and naughty.'

'Speak up, Miss, if you're talking of your betters,' chimed in the subject of our conversation. 'It's not polite to whisper in genteel society.'

Just then the door opened, and a servant entered.

'Please, Miss, mistress says, you'd better unpack your boxes and see to your things, when you've done your breakfast, because

she doesn't want the young ladies and Master Edward——' Here the young gentleman in question performed the ceremony of placing his thumb to his nose, in derision, it appeared to me, of the sender of the message, causing the girl to interrupt her speech with a burst of laughter. 'Mistress,' she resumed, 'don't want them to begin their lessons till she's seen you, and when she's had her own breakfast she'll send for you into the drawing-room.'

She disappeared with another glance at Master Edward, and another burst of laughter.

Glad of a respite, however short, from the society of my intractable pupil, I told the children to remain in the schoolroom, and amuse themselves till I came back again, and then went into my bedroom to unpack and arrange my things.

It is needless to relate here the details of a general fight, which broke out about five minutes after my departure, accompanied by the most dreadful war-cries and shrieks for

aid. Suffice it to say I rushed to the rescue, and throwing myself into the thick of the fray, put an end to the commotion by dragging the two girls by main force into my room, and locking the door upon the boy, before he could pick himself from the ground, to which I firmly believe his younger sister had thrown him, and effect an entrance. Finding he was defeated for the time, he amused himself by howling and whistling in a fiendish way, and upon this noise at length ceasing abruptly, one of his sisters informed me that he was quiet now because it was fly-killing time. 'He always kills a few after breakfast,' she said.

The process of unpacking and arranging had been proceeding for a considerable time, but was not nearly completed when I received Mrs. Chanter's almost dreaded summons. The only consolation in its inopportune arrival was the truth of the old-fashioned saying: 'The sooner a trouble begins the sooner it ends.' With this thought to soothe me, I hastily closed my boxes, obtained from the

eldest little girl information as to the whereabouts of the drawing-room, which the servant had neglected to give me, and hastened to obey orders—locking my companions in my bedroom at their own request and pocketing the key, in order to keep them out of the reach of their warlike brother.

'Oh my!' exclaimed that young gentleman, as I passed through his domain. 'Don't we *look grand*, and don't we *feel frightened*! I wouldn't be in your shoes, my girl, for a trifle, in spite of the way you've primed yourself up.'

I made no reply, but felt if some speedy alteration for the better did not take place in the wretched little speaker, the last unfortunate governess would soon have an imitator.

As I descended the stairs I recalled the directions given me as to the position in which the drawing-room lay. In the excitement of the moment, however, I could not recollect which way I was to take, and, utterly bewildered, I stood still on the stairs, vaguely

hoping for assistance in the shape of some one passing, from whom I could make fresh enquiries. I waited some time, but as ill-luck would have it, no one appeared. Such was my confusion, that it never once entered my mind to return to my room, and ask one of the children to accompany or re-direct me. At length, in my despair, I determined to knock at the first door I considered likely to belong to the room I was in search of, and if there should be no response to try another, and so on. It was a senseless resolution, but my fear of the ordeal I had to go through was so great, that it completely unnerved me, and disabled me from thinking clearly. Acting immediately upon my new idea, I advanced on my journey, and soon arrived at a landing where four doors were congregated. Selecting one which evidently from its position belonged to a room facing the street, and consequently, I thought, likely to be the one I was seeking, I advanced towards it and knocked timidly. No answer. To make

sure whether I was wrong or not, I repeated the summons more distinctly.

'Come in.'

Without noticing, or giving myself time to reflect upon the tone of the voice which uttered these words, I turned the handle of the door, and entered the room. Immediately upon doing so I saw my mistake. Directly before me, at a table covered with papers, sat a gentleman writing. As my eyes fell upon him, he raised his own with an enquiring expression, and, with a quick cry, half surprise, half joy, which in my sudden emotion I found it impossible to repress, I saw that I stood face to face with Mr. Harrop.

CHAPTER XXI.

My life seemed beginning afresh—some new, strange life, and yet one that I had lived before, in some long-distant past. I do not know now how to describe my feeling at the moment. I could not have described it then. It seemed as though all the present circumstances were perfectly natural, and that I had almost expected them, and yet the suddenness of my surprise seemed to suffocate me.

I looked steadily at my companion. Instantaneously the expression of his countenance told me he had failed to recognise me; and a quick pang shot through my heart, made up of despair, sorrow, shame, and a host of other feelings.

'I beg your pardon,' I stammered; 'I have mistaken the room. I thought this was

the drawing-room, and — and — that Mrs. Chanter was here.'

As I spoke, his face changed. He looked at me with an expression which seemed to say he knew me, but could not recollect who I was. When I saw that look on his face, my heart sank with a pain that was, to me, like the pain of death.

'One moment,' he exclaimed, as I turned to leave the room. He had risen at my entrance, and now, putting his pen down, came towards me, as I retraced my steps.

'Excuse me. It is, of course, not of the slightest consequence your having come in here. It has not interrupted me in the least. But—you will pardon my curiosity, I know—are you the young lady who has kindly undertaken the education of my sister's—of Mrs. Chanter's—children?'

The consideration for me that the form of this question implied, made me feel as if I had not really been in his presence till now, as though I had not till that moment fully re-

cognised him. The past seemed to strike me like a blow, and the inexplicable feeling, which in my miserable ignorance I had counted dead for ever, burst into strong, fresh life, and gathered strength with every breath I drew.

'Yes,' I answered, as calmly as I could speak the words; 'I am here as Mrs. Chanter's governess.'

I saw that he knew me now—knew me fully—but alas! the pain which should have been but the pleasant welcome of my heart to a kind and powerful friend, was even greater than before.

'My poor child,' he said, in the old tone—the tone so dearly remembered by the listener—'I am both pleased and grieved to see you here—both pleased and grieved to see you here! There is no mistake,' he continued; 'you are the poor little girl who left the college helpless and destitute, are you not? Your name is——'

He had forgotten even that!

The pain could not be greater now, nor the false unacknowledged hope more utterly hopeless, nor alas! the passionate life of the love I had counted dead more true and strong. If I had but died with it and never woke again!

'My name is Mary Browne,' I said. 'You are quite right. I am the poor girl who might have been dead now, but for your goodness and kindness, when she was homeless, and without a friend. The poor girl who can never thank you sufficiently for the help you gave her when she was utterly destitute. I have had cause to remember *you*,'—I went on, scarcely knowing what I said, some of the bitterness of despair that filled my heart finding vent in words—'*I* have had cause to remember *you* with gratitude till memory is dead—while you—have not even seen cause for remembering my name.'

As I began speaking in my passionate eagerness, he had come nearer to me, and taken both my hands, holding them between

his own, with the old kind look on his face deepened and intensified. When I had finished, he still stood watching me for a moment before he answered.

'You must not talk like this,' he said, at last, not noticing the latter part of my speech. 'I am only glad that what I did was really of assistance to you. As I told you long ago, I did it as an act of duty, and from circumstances which have since transpired, I feel now that it was not only an act of duty, but of reparation.'

What could he mean! I looked at him enquiringly. He had released my hands now, but still stood watching me intently.

'I see you don't quite understand,' he said, kindly, 'and it is unnecessary to enter into explanations. You know this, that you were unhappy, and not considerately treated during your residence at the college; and I feel sure you are also convinced that such treatment as you met with was not in accordance with any wish of mine, and that I was in fact utterly ignorant of it.'

'Oh! yes,' I answered quickly, 'I know that well.'

'And not doubting for a moment such certainty on your part,' he continued, 'it is needless for me to enter into the details of a subject which can never be otherwise than an unpleasant one to me. Where have you been all these long years?' he added, after a pause.

'With Mrs. Wilmot's children, at the same place from which I wrote my last letter to you.' The blood rushed to my cheek at the memories the words recalled.

'Your last letter to me?' he answered, after some consideration. 'I have had but one letter from you since you left the college, and that must have been written immediately after your receipt of mine.'

It was my turn now to look surprised.

'I have written to you twice since then,' I said. 'Once before I went to Mrs. Wilmot's, when I sent back to you half of the money you so kindly lent me; and once from

her house, when I had been with her a year, to return you the other half. Did you not receive it all safely? Did you not have the letters?'

He hesitated. 'The letters? No. The money? Most certainly—yes.'

'The money, and not the letters?' I exclaimed.

'The money, and not the letters. You look puzzled.'

'I can't understand how you should get the one and not the other.'

'It is very easily understood,' he said, his face flushing. 'Some people perceive a difference between suppressing letters and appropriating money, though to the conscience of one who is truly honourable the actions are radically the same.'

'Who could suppress your letters?' I asked. 'Who could have any interest in doing so?'

'There was but one person who could, or I trust would, have been guilty of such an

action. If you think a moment you will understand, without my speaking more plainly.'

'But I do not see the motive,' I said, his meaning becoming suddenly clear to me.

'No—nor I either. Probably she did not know it herself. I know enough of women,' he went on, after a pause, 'to have learnt that it is impossible for men to fathom the motives of those actions, of the inducements to which even the charming actors are themselves ignorant.'

The old satirical expression came over his mouth like a cloud, effacing its calm beauty as though some hand had struck it out, and still with power to raise again a portion of my old dislike and dread.

'But yet you had the money?'

'Doubtless so. I had it as surely as you sent it; but not knowing that it came from you.'

Still I could not comprehend.

'Do you not understand?' he continued.

'The person we speak of is—to my judgment—one of the class I just now mentioned, consisting of those who make to themselves a distinction between one dishonourable action and another of the same nature. Feeling this, I see the whole business clearly. The letters were doubtless opened by the hand which always took the college letters from the letter-box. They were read by the owner of that hand, and by that same hand were committed to the flames, and the moneys they contained—still by the same hand—put with other money, and placed in my possession as accruing to me from the college proceeds. Now do you perceive?'

'Yes. I understand now.'

'It is very easily understood. The only regret to me is that you should have had reason to think me rude and discourteous, in not replying to your communications, and acknowledging the receipt of the enclosures, which,' he added, smiling, 'though I suppose there is no alternative now, I

should certainly, at the time, have declined to accept.'

'I did not think you rude at all. I only thought of your generosity and kindness; and I am glad you received the money in the way you did, for I could not have taken it back as a gift.' With this little mixture of truth and falsehood, I looked at him more firmly than as yet I had dared to do.

He made no reply, but returned my look, with an amused expression on his face.

'I must go now,' I exclaimed suddenly, a recollection of Mrs. Chanter darting through my mind. 'Your sister sent for me to the drawing-room some time since, and is doubtless now wondering at my non-appearance.'

'Well; good-bye for the present, my child,' he said, shaking hands with me kindly. 'You must remember I am always your friend, and if you meet with any difficulties during your residence here, I will at any time do my best to help you out of them. I dare say you will find plenty,' he added, laughing. 'Most

young ladies do, I believe, who have the misfortune to be governesses. But remember, you can always have, at least, my advice in your troubles, if you think it likely to be of any use to you.'

'Thank you,' I said, 'you are very kind.' I could think of nothing else to say.

He opened the door for me to pass out. 'Don't make another mistake,' he added, laughingly; 'the drawing-room is the second —no, the third door to the left.'

In my confusion I had forgotten to seek farther information on this all-important subject. Thanking him again, I hastily followed his directions, pausing a moment before entering the new presence to calm and quiet myself, for my face felt hot and flushed, and I was far from possessing that calmness of demeanour which is considered befitting the position I occupied.

CHAPTER XXII.

KNOWING the obstinacy with which some people cling to their first-conceived idea on a subject, or of a person, I resolved that my new employer should be impressed as favourably as possible as to the importance of my appearance. To effect this purpose, I threw back my head, drew up my figure, and endeavoured to fix upon my countenance as grave and business-like an expression as it was possible for it to wear. My poor little light was, however, soon put out. Seated in an arm-chair, looking, as I entered, at anything but myself, was a lady whom I took at the first glance to be the most beautifu woman I had ever seen. She was reclining easily, with her eyes half-drooping, and a languid expression on her countenance, as

though she were tired of the world at large, and her own existence in particular. She was tall, and stout, and broadly made, but beautifully fair and delicate-looking, and though she was apparently upwards of forty years of age, her hair was as soft and abundant as that of a young girl, and of a bright colour, almost golden. (The new light hair-dye had not been heard of then, so there could be no suspicion of art having assisted nature to produce the superb hue.) She did not raise her eyes till nearly a minute after I had entered the room, and closed the door behind me. Whether this was done to show her opinion of the non-importance of her visitor, I know not, but when, at length, her gaze fell upon me, I wondered how I could have thought her so very beautiful. There was dignity in the form, and brilliancy in the hair and complexion, but the general expression of the features when looked at closely was so unintelligent and commonplace, that it put all material claims to beauty in the shade.

'Miss Browne, I presume?'

I bowed; wondering how many more times I was doomed to go through the commencement of a kind of inverted Church Catechism.

'Oh, pray be seated, Miss Browne.'

I became seated, but felt still less at my ease than I had done standing.

'You have been some time in complying with my wish, Miss Browne.'

'I was unexpectedly detained,' I answered in as calm a tone as I could assume, 'or I should have been with you some time ago.'

'It has not inconvenienced me, I am obliged to you,' she replied, taking my words apologetically, 'only I am anxious before you commence your duties, to speak with you respecting my dear children, their various requirements, and dispositions, and—and—so on.'

I bowed again.

'Being an invalid,' she continued after a pause, during which she had eyed me narrowly, though with the same listless expres-

sion on her face which it had worn on my entrance, and which I began to imagine she considered suited to her style of beauty (allowing it not to be natural)—'being an invalid, I am unable to educate them myself, a task which it has always been the greatest desire of my heart to undertake. I am a confirmed invalid, Miss Browne; I assure you I am seldom well for two days together.'

She seemed to expect me to say something, so I expressed my sorrow for her unpleasant state of health in as polite terms as possible.

'It is very trying,' she continued, 'very. Indeed, considering the peculiar and varied dispositions of my children, I may even call it a double-edged affliction; but, I am thankful to say, one which will be considerably lessened, when I can feel that I am in possession of a governess who will, as far as such a thing is possible, supply to her pupils the part of their missing mother. Have you

observed, Miss Browne, what a dear, delicate, loving, impressionable little boy my son is?'

'I have been with him but a very short time,' I answered, 'only during breakfast. He did not then appear to be very delicate.'

'Indeed! Perhaps you did not observe him closely.'

'I had an opportunity of observing him *very* closely,' I replied, with a vivid recollection of the scene in which he had borne so distinguished a part, 'and he impressed me as being anything but a delicate child.'

'That shows, Miss Browne, how deceitful appearances may be. To *my* eye—a mother's, remember—he *looks* delicate. But whether he appears so to you or not,' she continued, hesitatingly, as though conscious I felt an amusement I was endeavouring to conceal—'whether he appears so to you or not, one thing is certain, he *is* most exquisitely organised both mentally and physically; in fact, he is an infant counterpart of myself, and requires the most tender treatment.'

'Indeed!' I said, not knowing what else to say.

'When you have seen a little more of him, you will easily perceive the truth of my words. He has a most active and intelligent mind, and is of the most open and generous nature. In fact, if I may so express it, his mind is too much for his body. For days together, I am frequently compelled to keep him in my exclusive society.'

This, at all events, was hopeful.

'And now, Miss Browne, putting my dear boy on one side for the moment, may I ask you to give me a full, clear, and concise statement of your method of instruction. Not that I have the least doubt as to your superior capability, after the high recommendation I received from Mrs. Wilmot—who, by the way, appears from her letter to be a very lady-like sort of person—but I have peculiar notions on the subject of education, and should be glad to know how far your ideas coincide with my own.'

During this speech, I managed to recover my usual amount of self-possession and courage, which had been gradually dwindling away previously, and I at once began to narrate fully and clearly—though certainly not concisely—the routine I had adopted with my former pupils. The languid face never lost its languor during my speech, in fact, the expression of listlessness and indifference upon it seemed to deepen as my account proceeded.

'There are good points in your system, Miss Browne,' was the comment when I, at length, ceased speaking, 'but it is still far from faultless. It was, possibly, suited to the children of your last employer, but *my* children are peculiar children, and require peculiar instruction.'

She said all her 'I's' and 'My's' in italics. They stuck out of her sentences like points. *Her* children, and *her* opinions alike appeared to lay claim to importance, *as* children, and *as* opinions, solely from the relation they bore to herself.

'Will you allow me, Miss Browne, in *my* turn, to give you some of *my* ideas on the subject of Education, more especially as to the class of education adapted to *my* children? *My* children require,' &c., &c., &c.

It would be tedious to recapitulate here the flow of words that fell from the languid lips. I listened as attentively as it was in my power to do, but could scarcely understand the full meaning of the speaker. Every 'I' and 'My,' and 'Mine,' seemed to run into me like a pin.

'Will you engage, Miss Browne, to follow this system as closely as possible?'

'Certainly, Madam.'

'There is one thing more,' she continued, 'which I must not forget to speak to you about. It is this. I have no doubt whatever respecting the kindness of your disposition, but still it is my duty to tell you that *my* children, under all circumstances, require the most peculiarly gentle treatment. I make it a point upon first speaking with my gover-

nesses always to mention this. *My* children are not children upon whom harsh treatment has at all a desirable effect. *My* son, especially, requires the utmost tenderness. I trust, Miss Browne, that in your dealings with him you will always remember this.'

'I shall never correct him, Mrs. Chanter, unless it is necessary to do so.'

'He never needs *correction*, Miss Browne. A word is sufficient for him, and that word must on no account be uttered in a tone even approaching to that of anger. I had great trouble with his last governess in that respect. She was a person not at all suited to be with a child of such a dauntless and enthusiastic temperament as my son possesses. His boyish ways irritated her, and the spontaneous ebullitions of youthful feeling, so difficult for such as he to repress, occasionally caused her to give way to fits of passion, which, from the account I heard of them, must have been painful to witness; and, certainly, most reprehensible when considered in the light of an

example to *my* children, most reprehensible and detrimental. I trust you have not a hasty temper, Miss Browne?'

'Not particularly so,' I answered.

A sharp, sudden pain seemed to strike my heart. I was again in the drawing-room at the College—the grave, kind voice was sounding its words of warning in my ears—the grave, kind eyes looking pityingly on me—as, alas! pityingly—and only pityingly—they had looked on me to-day.

'That means, I doubt not, that it is not so at all,' continued my companion, 'only your modesty will not allow you to speak plainly. I am glad to hear it, most thoroughly glad to hear it, as my children will be thrown entirely upon you for society. I am sorry to say such a thing of Seaford, for it is my own native place, but from one end of it to the other, there are positively no children with whom I could possibly permit mine to associate.'

'Indeed!' I exclaimed.

'No! None at all! I assure you it is the truth. In fact, there are very few people with whom even I myself can be on terms of acquaintanceship—though my children's case is still worse than mine, for they have no companions at all—literally, none at all. I am not one of those persons who imagine little people will not easily pick up evil, and that, when they do, it can be easily eradicated. Not at all! I would rather go into bad company myself—as I have to do—feeling myself more capable of resisting its contamination, than send my children into it, to return to me polluted. Therefore, as they are not *compelled* to go out, I keep them entirely at home. It is exceedingly painful to me to deprive them of the amusements natural to their age, but I have no other resource. Anything is better than allowing them to associate with their inferiors, and so becoming deteriorated in mind and manners.'

'Are there no respectable children at all in Seaford?' I enquired.

'Respectable! Miss Browne? I am not speaking of respectability! I simply say there are no children in this neighbourhood who are of the same *caste*, if I may so call it, as mine; consequently, *my* children pine in vain for companionship suitable to their age. And, yet, their deprivation, though more complete than my own, is not so acute. I am a person to whom friendship is a necessity, and yet I have not a single friend. No! Not a person near me, to whom I can, conscientiously, apply that endearing title!'

'It must be very painful,' I observed.

'To one of my susceptible temperament it is doubly so. When I was first compelled, by force of circumstances, to take up my abode in this abominable place—where I had not been since my childhood—my heart was overflowing with sympathy and affection, but it soon grew cold. It was natural for me to be anxious to meet with people whom I could feel were my equals in birth, station, education, and refinement. But, though I searched

in every nook and corner, the effort ended in the most complete and miserable disappointment. It was impossible for me to meet with one individual whom I could feel justified in calling a perfect and unmistakable "Lady."'

'Indeed!' I said.

'I assure you, Miss Browne, that it is not from want of sociability on my part that I live so much by myself. Now, the Smiths, who reside in that large house by the station —you observed that large house by the railway station as you came along?'

'I don't remember doing so.'

'Well, that's where the Smiths live. They're visitable people, apparently; but, I am sorry to say, only apparently. I returned their call when I first came here, but it was impossible for me to keep up the acquaintance, quite impossible. You will scarcely believe me, Miss Browne, but Mrs. Smith positively received me, on my first visit, with her baby in her arms—her *own* baby in her *own* arms. Imagine a woman in the position of a

lady committing such a breach of etiquette! Did you ever hear of such a thing?'

'It was very singular,' said the hypocritical listener.

'It was very ill-bred, and rude, and impolite. Then Dr. Rose—one of the oldest families in the county, you know—he's as bad, and his wife's his counterpart. My first husband having been a medical man, and my first cousin, I thought, as the profession was, as it were, in my family, I ought to return their call, which I did. But how could I continue to associate, Miss Browne, with a woman who lets her children run about the streets without a nurse—and even at times, without gloves?'

'Indeed!' I ejaculated. My vocabulary seemed likely to become limited to this word, whether apposite or not.

'It's very dreadful. I dare not let *my* children associate with such little savages. If Aura, dear child, should imbibe such low ideas as they must possess, it would break my heart. I would rather see her dead than

see her vulgar. Therefore she, and her brother and sister, must be completely isolated, for all the people in Seaford are one as bad as the other.'

'It must be very unpleasant for you to be so much alone,' I observed; perceiving that I was expected to make some extra remark this time.

'Not at all, Miss Browne,' was the eloquent answer. 'A cultivated mind has always resources. It looks inwards with a piercing eye, and feeds upon itself.' Here the speaker paused, evidently lost in a kind of languid wonder at her own brilliancy. 'A cultivated mind,' she repeated slowly, 'feeds upon itself. Such is my case; though, I must confess, that at the present time I am not thrown so entirely upon myself for companionship as I have been. One or two highly distinguished families are now passing a short time here, and amongst others is a gentleman who was for many years a very intimate friend of a brother of *mine* who is

now dead. Of course, he received a general invitation to "The Laurels," and so many of his acquaintances and *their* acquaintances have found their way after him, that, just now, we are seldom without company of some sort.'

'It makes a pleasant change, I should think.'

'Not that I like it,' she went on, as though not hearing my remark; 'I object to it strongly, as in mixed society, one occasionally cannot tell to whom one is really talking. However, they'll all be leaving soon, and then, I'm thankful to say, it will be over. Not but that Mr. Launceston, having been my poor brother's friend, must necessarily be a perfect gentleman, and, as such, always welcome here; but there I stop. His daughter is most objectionable; and his friends, though, no doubt, respectable, no friends of mine. So, after all, you see, the pleasure of my present society is, by no means, unalloyed.'

The name had brought to me such sud-

den memories—such a flood of recollection—such a confident hope—such a deep joy—such joy as we feel when some long-lost, long-sought-for relic lies tear-stained between the hand and eye, that even the languor of the languid face gave place to a kind of languid interest in the inexplicable change in my own.

'What is the matter, Miss Browne?'

'I think I know Miss Launceston,' I said. 'At least, some years ago, I met some one of that name.'

'Ah! that accounts for it.' 'It,' probably, meant the expression of my countenance. 'There is no mistaking her, if you have once seen her,' she continued. 'She's certainly very beautiful, though it's not the style *I* admire. But it's her manners. They are so eccentric and objectionable, that no one who has once been in her company could ever forget her.'

There could no longer be any doubt. The dearly-loved friend of my girlhood was found.

'She is is so peculiar,' continued my in-

formant, 'both in her ideas and in her manner of expressing them, and so absurdly contradictory in every way, that her presence has always been an annoyance to me. But I cannot very well get rid of her, as Mr. Launceston would certainly resent it if I ignored her, and I should then get into trouble in another quarter also. She was a school-fellow of my daughter's, and that is another reason for my tolerating her. She may be very clever, and I dare say she is. All *I* know is, that she's very irritating.'

There was no irritation in the tone, no sign of irritation in the face, no strong resemblance in either tone or face to the former speaker of almost those very words. But the words themselves were sufficient. From them alone I should have now suspected, even if I had not previously done so, that I was in the presence of the mother of my well-remembered acquaintance, Fanny Harrop.

'Do you know much of Miss Launceston?' continued the impassive voice.

'We were at Victoria College together for upwards of two years.'

'Then you also know my daughter?'

'I was there at the same time, but we saw very little of each other.'

'Ah! probably your positions were different. You were a pupil, though, I suppose?'

'A governess-pupil. I taught as well as received instruction.'

'Ah! that accounts for it. Of course the acquaintance was necessarily slight.'

The blood rushed to my face. It was enough that I saw she noticed it. I made no remark.

'May I trouble you, Miss Browne, to put down the blinds?'

I did so in silence.

'Do not let me detain you any longer, but pray remember what I have said respecting gentleness to the children.'

I murmured something inaudible.

'And send Edward to me, Miss Laun-

ceston—I mean, Miss Browne—that unpleasant girl's name is always rising to my lips. Send Edward to me, if you please. He had better spend the day down here. I fear the continued excitement and novelty of your presence might prove too much for his nerves. He is such a delicately-organised child.'

'I will not forget, Mrs. Chanter.'

'Have the kindness to shut the door after you, Miss Browne?'

'Yes, Mrs. Chanter.'

Then I suited the action to the word, and placed that useful portion of a room between myself and the large languid figure, which, leaning back in its seat, looked as calm and placid as on my first entrance.

I returned to the study, and lost no time in dismissing Master Edward for the day, an arrangement which appeared to give infinite satisfaction to all parties. He left the room whistling; stopping a moment, however, before taking his departure, to make a compre-

hensive grimace at the assembled company. When he was fairly off, I set to work steadily with my more tractable pupils, and the remainder of the day passed busily, without any fresh source of annoyance.

Escaped to my room when the children had retired to rest and my duties were over, I sat down, and tried to think as calmly and rationally as I was in the habit of thinking; but in vain. My heart was in a tempest of emotion, my mind flew from one subject to another with the rapidity of lightning, no single fixed idea remaining for an instant. Yet, in every vague thought, pervading my very soul like some essence which was a part of my being, crushing with a giant's strength every fresh attempt to reason myself into sanity and calmness, was a fierce, awful sense of despair. A despair which at first I shrank from, but which, with a strange contradiction, I grew in a few short hours almost to love, as I had once loved the mad, groundless hope which had engendered it. It seemed,

however horrible in itself, to be the only remnant of that hope; and so I clung to it as in some way connected with the wild, passionate longing of the past, and the almost childish trust I had had in some dimly painted golden future. And yet, what my hope had really been, I knew not. It had had no defined shape at any time, in any way. What it had been, I knew not. I only knew that I had seen him face to face—that his quiet non-recognition of me had struck me as a dreadful blow will strike and wound—that the strange misery I had heard of, and read of, and laughed at as exaggerated or impossible, was mine—it seemed to me in its fullest and most awful sense. I only knew that he was close to me even now—with no thought of me in his heart; that it was his footfall which had sounded through the passage as on the previous night—that, in plain English, I had nursed myself into an uncontrollable passion for a man who had no more idea of loving me than he had of marrying the Queen of

England. I never undressed that night, I lay down outside the bed and did not fall asleep tlll daybreak. Poor blind, weak, miserable girl!

CHAPTER XXIII.

For two or three days I passed my time in a sort of dull stupor, hugging to my heart, with the fervour of a devotee, the despairing resignation which seemed my only refuge. The troubles of my new life, which had previously appeared in perspective almost insupportable, failed to affect me, or even to cause me a momentary irritation. It was as though some great blow had laid my mind dormant and lifeless; as though I had come to that stage of suffering, that human ill had no further power to wound me. Like that despairing queen who reached the acme of earthly pain, I said in my heart, 'Nothing can hurt me now.'

In my ignorance and inexperience, I thought that this state of mind would always

last, that it would kill me in time, wearing my life out by degrees till I should find rest in death.

I suppose this is, to a certain extent, the feeling of most young people under similar circumstances, though in my case it was increased and intensified by the peculiar loneliness and retirement of the life I had hitherto led. In proportion to my friendlessness, and the scarcity of worthy objects on which to lavish my affection, had been the force and power of this one absorbing sentiment. It had, unconsciously to me, grown with my growth and strengthened with my strength, till it had become part of my very being. One word—nay, one look—had shown me, at once, not only its hopelessness, but its utter absurdity, and, in a moment, my negative happiness—if I may so call it—was dashed to pieces, and the life of my life struck dead.

When the first few days of bitterness were passed away, I began to find how soon the fiercest feelings will wear themselves out.

The unhappiness which, in its first acuteness, I thought would always be as terrible as it was then, had grown less and less. It had probably decreased gradually, though to me imperceptibly, from the moment of its birth. Three weeks went by, and still it decreased, giving place, by degrees, to reason and calmness. I no longer hurried into my room at night to give vent to the agony which seemed killing me—waiting for the longed-for voice bidding the children 'Good-night,' at their bedroom door—only to stop my ears at the first sound of the footstep which preceded it. I no longer woke in the morning with a horrible, bewildered sense of some reason for despair—without knowing, or having power to recollect for the moment, what had actually happened—to wake fully, the next, to a broad, awful consciousness of everything. Still, however, as had been the case from the first, my pain seemed greater when I unclosed my eyes after my night's rest, than at any other time. (I have found

out since, that all great troubles seem worse than usual when we first wake in the morning. There is such a terrible rawness about them when they first confront us after temporary forgetfulness.) As the day advanced, and a regular and certain routine of duties had to be performed, I gained power to turn my back upon the foe, and to be scarcely conscious of its presence; but yet when the first full recollection of it dawned upon me, after the transient relief my night's rest afforded, it still seized me with the fierce strength of a giant.

But Time, the great healer, went on—and I lived my life, and performed my daily tasks—and though, in my girlish ignorance, I said to myself that my heart was broken, I at length found myself taking a rather whole-hearted interest in the things of the every-day world. I cannot smile, even now, when I think of all that time—for my pain was, at the moment, so terribly real!

I remember that the first subject which

engaged my attention when I began to think steadily on anything else but my trouble, was the recollection of the conversation I had had with Mrs. Chanter. I called to mind the greater part of the local information with which she had favoured me—and the fact that she had spoken of my dear lost friend, Marion Launceston, as being known to her —as coming frequently into the very house where I was living, filled me with a feeling almost like joy. The knowledge that I might at some time, not far distant, again see the loved companion of my school-days did much towards rousing my dormant energies, and making me feel less listless and careless of life. I began at length to speculate on the chances of an early meeting with her. Although Mrs. Chanter had told me that she and her father frequently spent their evening at 'The Laurels'—in that fact, in itself, lay very little hope—for mine was invariably passed in the schoolroom of that mansion, not in the drawing-room. I began to

wonder that I was never sent for to show off my musical talents for the amusement of my employer's guests, after the manner of my kind. With the thought that, sooner or later, this duty would probably have to be performed, and that in that case I not only might see Marion, but should almost certainly see Mr. Harrop, came a feeling of dread and hope—hope that grew into a passionate longing, to which, in a few days, all other feelings became in a measure subservient.

I began to listen every evening for music, or voices, downstairs, and soon remarked that a night seldom passed without a rush of sound coming up the staircase from the drawing-room, whenever the door of that room was opened. (From this I concluded that Mrs. Chanter received company very frequently.) Having once fixed my attention on this fact, it appeared surprising to me that I had not noticed it before. I soon contracted the habit of keeping my own door

open, to catch more distinctly the sound of the piano, or the happy voices singing. Sometimes the same sweet tenor which had lulled me to sleep on the night of my arrival performed that kind office again. Sometimes it sang an old sad song, which my brother Louis had sung in times past, in his small childish treble. It brought back to me all those dead days. It had been one of his fancies to sing this song every night, before he knelt down with me at our mother's knee to say his prayers; and she would listen to it with a calm smile, like that of a face in a picture I used to say to myself. It was the same sad air, though this voice sang the original German words in place of the English version which my lost brother had loved so much. It made me, at times, dimly fancy that my early days had returned, and all my loneliness and desolation were but a dream.

One evening I was about to retire to rest earlier than usual. I had already put aside

the book I had been reading, and was looking out of the window into the clear night before finally leaving the room, when a knock at the door startled me. The message, which, from long delay, was now almost unexpected, had arrived at last.

'Mrs. Chanter will be pleased, Miss, if you will go down into the drawing-room, and take your music.'

I gave myself no time to think; or, rather, I resolutely put reflection aside. Hastening into my bedroom, I smoothed my hair at the glass, put a fresh ribbon on my neck to make myself look bright, selected a few pieces of music from the stock in my box (I had not used any since I had left Mrs. Wilmot's), and with a beating heart decided I was now ready to obey orders. 'If my face would not be so colourless,' I said; but that I could not remedy.

I hurried downstairs, with the music in my hand, pleased to think that that would at at once explain my presence to the assembled

visitors. As I approached the door of the drawing-room, it was opened by a servant, who passed out; and who, as she did so, stood aside for me to enter, and then closed the door behind me directly I had done so. The dazzling light, after the dimness of the room upstairs, seemed to blind me; but for some moments I stood unnoticed, and had ample time to recover my equanimity. There were about twenty people in the room. This I observed afterwards. For the moment, all I tried to see was the one face I almost dreaded seeing.

As I glanced round quickly at the little groups, for the most part engaged in conversation, a quick, clear chord was struck upon the piano, and a gentleman began singing. It was the voice I had heard so often singing the well-remembered song. As the first note of it rang through the room, all other sounds were hushed, and forgetting for a moment the object my eyes had been seeking, I turned hastily to the

piano. Directly opposite to me, as I did so, I saw the face I had before sought vainly. The eyes were fixed on me with a kind expression of encouragement and sympathy. Close to the piano, with her gaze fixed now on the song, now on the singer, the old passion of her face intensified, her girlish beauty developed and perfected by the years which had passed since our separation, stood Marion Launceston. In her evening dress of some bright light colour, she looked to me utterly unlike my friend of bygone days. And yet, as I stood watching her, I wondered! I wondered at the gracious expression and lovingkindness of her face. I wondered at the soft beauty of her loveliness.

The last notes of the song died away, and the audience expressed their approbation in a sound like the buzz of a gigantic bee—which I now know to be the proper thing for an audience to do under the circumstances, though my knowledge was not so extensive

then. I glanced at the singer as he rose from his seat and crossed the room, acknowledging by a slight bow and a few quick words the thanks of the company. He was a young man, apparently about twenty-five years of age. He was well-made, and apparently thoroughly self-possessed ; and though but slightly over middle height, had a certain strong look about his figure, which would probably have caused him to look much older than his years, if his extremely boyish face had not dispelled the illusion. This face was dark-skinned and lighted up by a pair of handsome dark eyes, which in their quick, eager beauty, were, strangely enough, so like those of my long-lost friend, standing near him, that the resemblance startled me. There was a bright lovable look in this face, but no extraordinary amount of intelligence. It put me in mind at the moment, I remember, of a picture I had once seen of a sailor-boy leaving his mother for the first time. And as I looked at him a fancy came over

me that he had been a favourite with his mother, and that she was dead.

All this observation and thought passed through my mind with the utmost rapidity; and the subject of it had scarcely had time to take a seat before a voice, well remembered by me, broke in—

'Do you know no other song, Mr. Graeme? I have never heard you sing any but that.'

'But then, Miss Launceston, I have only had the honour of singing before you on one other occasion, I think. I know fifty—a hundred more. You have only to command. Shall I recommence my labours?'

'Presently,' she said, laughing. 'Perhaps you had better take a rest now.'

Though I listened to this, I could see that Mr. Harrop was coming towards the door at which I was still standing with my music. As he approached he put out his hand to me with a smile.

'How are you this evening?' he said.

'It almost spoils the pleasure of seeing you, not to be at liberty to speak to you for so long.'

I thanked him, and said I was quite well.

'There's an old acquaintance of yours here, I believe; would you not like to come and speak to her?'

Slipping my hand through his arm, he led me across the room.

'Miss Launceston—You will not, I think, need any introduction to this young lady. She has had the luck—whether good or ill, time must prove—to stumble upon a nest of old friends who——'

She had been looking first at me, then at him, then at me again; and now interrupted him with a quick cry of pleasure and surprise.

'Mary!' she said. 'My poor little lost Mary! Is it really you?'

I could not speak. If I had tried to do so, I should have been unable to repress my tears.

'Where have you been?' she went on eagerly. 'How is it you are here? Oh! Mr. Harrop,' she added, as though beginning to understand the position I occupied, 'why did you not tell me this before?' She had taken both my hands, and her eyes were overflowing. He looked pained and hurt as she spoke.

'I did not know,' he said. 'I was not aware you knew Miss Browne so well. It really only just now struck me that you must have been at the College at the same time as she was, and would, no doubt, recognise her as an acquaintance. I am so very sorry——'

She did not wait to hear more, but with the quick impulse I so well remembered, turned suddenly, and led—indeed almost dragged—me with her to the other side of the room.

'Fanny! See here. Do you know her?'

The young girl she addressed looked up languidly from the flower she was pulling to

pieces. As she did so, I recognised the scarcely-changed features, and pretty, slight figure of my ex-schoolmate, Fanny Harrop.

'Of course I know her,' she answered immediately, fixing her eyes on me, with a tinge of the old careless irritation in her voice; 'it's Mary Browne, from the College.'

As she spoke she glanced from me to the roll of music under my arm, and finally put out her hand slowly, and met mine half way.

'How do you do?' she said. 'I knew you were here, because mamma told me so. Didn't you know, Marion, that she was Aura's and Nellie's governess?'

'I knew nothing of the kind,' said my friend, shortly. 'If you knew it previously, Fanny, I wonder you have not seen her before.'

'How do you know I've not seen her before?'

'By your manner, my dear. There is no mistaking that.'

Miss Harrop slightly frowned—not im-

proving her appearance by so doing—and then, without replying, bent her head, and resumed her occupation of pulling the flower to pieces. Mr. Harrop had followed Marion and myself across the room, and had been quietly listening to what was passing.

'Fanny,' he said, 'this is not a very warm welcome to give to your old school-friend in your mother's house.'

She looked up at him with a bright flush of annoyance on her face.

'I am very glad to see her, uncle; but really I did not know much of her at the College—did I, Miss Browne? In fact, though I knew you were here, I should not have recognised you at all,' she went on, 'if Marion hadn't brought you to me. I've seen you so often together, that that made me know you at once.'

'I knew you directly,' I said. 'You've scarcely altered at all.

'Not altered?' she asked, quickly.

'You don't look any older, I mean.'

'Ah! very likely.' Then she turned her eyes down again, and again began picking at the remainder of the flower. At this moment the gentleman who had sung the German song came across the room and took a chair by her side.

'I don't like that song,' she said to him, without raising her eyes. 'Why do you always sing it?'

'Because I understood you to say, some time back, that you *did* like it.'

'You are quite mistaken. I never said so. I don't like it, and nobody likes it.'

'I beg your pardon, Fanny,' interrupted Mr. Harrop. 'It's a favourite of mine, so please don't run it down. Miss Launceston likes it too; and Miss Browne was listening to it. As for your mamma, she has frequently begged Mr. Graeme to sing it. Is it not so, Margaret?'

I followed the direction of his eyes, and my own fell on Mrs. Chanter, seated near us, in the same chair and the same attitude as

when I had last seen her. Her complexion was very dazzling, her eyes and her hair brilliant; but the languor I so well remembered still rested upon her like a cloud.

'Yes,' she said, 'I like it. Good evening, Miss Browne.'

Half afraid that I had committed a grave error in not paying my respects to her upon first entering the room, I returned her salutation, wondering at the same time how I could have forgotten her existence so completely as I had done during the past few minutes, and how it was that I had not observed her before, when she was seated so near.

'I sent for you, Miss Browne, thinking you could enhance the pleasure of our evening by the exercise of your musical talents. Pray play us one of your prettiest pieces.'

'I was just wondering whether you intended carrying your music about with you

all the evening,' said her brother. 'Allow me to relieve you of it.'

He took it from my hand, and led me to the piano. Hastily selecting a piece, I sat down and played it. My performance, never very brilliant, was now most indifferent; but, heedless of the effect it might produce, I went on boldly, Mr. Harrop turning over the leaves of my music, and Marion Launceston standing by my side.

'You dear, silly, good-natured little thing, you always try to do your best,' said the latter, as I closed the piece to the same buzzing sound, though modified, which had succeeded the last performance. 'Here, come away, and talk to me,' she added, quickly. 'Mr. Graeme is going to sing again, and no one will notice us.'

She led me to the other end of the long room, which opened into a conservatory sweet with the choicest flowers.

'Come in here,' she said. 'No one will be the wiser.' Mr. Harrop was an ex-

ception, though, for he looked after us laughing.

She led me down the conservatory, which was of considerable length. Arrived at the end of it, I found we were quite screened from observation by the shade of some tropical plants. She paused a moment, and then opened a door, which led by a flight of steps into the grounds. The fresh night air came in.

'It's very chilly,' I said. 'Don't have it open, we shall take cold.'

'Put this round your shoulders, then.'

She threw me a shawl from a heap of garden clothes which lay in a corner, and then commenced wrapping one round herself. I obeyed orders.

'It's almost like sacrilege,' she said, laughing. 'Do you know they belong to Mrs. Chanter? Aren't you afraid?'

'I am not afraid of *her*,' I answered.

She looked at me incredulously.

'It's true,' I said. 'I have no fear of

her, nor indeed of anyone in my heart. It's only my natural nervousness which gives me the appearance of timidity. I do not *feel* any, however looks may be against me.'

'Oh! you confess to the nervousness then?'

I laughed, and nodded. How strange it seemed to be near her once more, watching the varying expressions and quiet humour of her face!

'But why should you be nervous in her presence, any more, for instance, than in mine?'

'Well, I am so, and there are several reasons for it, which I am not going to state now.'

'As decided as ever, I see; but do you know, Mary, that the very facts, which I have no doubt cause you to be nervous, would produce exactly the contrary effect upon me. Were I placed in your situation, my natural boldness would be developed to an almost incredible extent. I should turn

the tables on Mrs. Chanter. She'd soon begin to be alarmed at *me*.'

'She's that now,' I said, laughing. 'She as good as confessed it the first morning I saw her.' I am afraid there was a little exaggeration in this.

'No! Did she?' she exclaimed, evidently much amused. 'What is she alarmed at?'

'She's not exactly alarmed, but she says you're one of the most unpleasant, irritating girls she ever met with.'

She laughed her old, merry, school-girl laugh.

'How very flattering! But never mind, Mary dear. I want to talk to you about yourself, not about her.'

'What about myself?'

'Well, first of all, why did you not answer my last three letters? I am talking to you, but do not know yet whether I am still to care for you or not.'

Then came explanations of the past, un-

necessary to detail here. The story of my life since our parting, useless expressions of regret, and the pleasure of renewed friendship. We were still talking eagerly, when a quick step came down the conservatory; and passing round the plants which had hidden our retreat, Mr. Harrop made his appearance.

She looked at him and smiled.

'Come,' he said, 'this is too bad. It's enough to make me act the infuriated parent, and order you both indoors.'

'What have we done?'

'What you have done is bad enough, but what you are doing is worse.'

'Well, what have we done, and what are we doing?'

'You've withdrawn from society in a most inexcusable manner, and now you are adopting the most unmistakable method of putting that portion of society represented by your immediate friends to the expense of nursing your colds.'

'A very nice little speech, but *impromptu* —not the one you came to make. There's another at the back of it, already prepared before you dared to venture here. The preface has been quite long enough. Now deliver it.'

She met his scrutiny with a glance of mock defiance from her bright eyes. He laughed carelessly, but I noticed the look of admiration on his face. I could not wonder at it, nor even feel the slightest sense of pain.

'I obey orders, of course. "Please, may I have the extreme honour of escorting you two young ladies to supper?" That was the speech, and allow me to add to it, that if we wish to avoid the rudeness of delaying the commencement of that hospitable meal, there is, in common parlance, no time to be lost.'

As he spoke he bowed, first to Marion, then to me, and ended by offering an arm to each.

Marion threw off her shawl, and accepted his escort. I drew back.

'Excuse me. I took supper before coming to the drawing-room; I would rather not go down.'

He looked at me, as though surprised; and then turned to Marion, as if he thought she was the proper person to appeal to.

'What's to be done now, Miss Launceston? This is another and still more decided phase of rebellion.'

'Nonsense, Mary. You must come down. I have a great deal to say to you. Don't be obstinate.'

'I am not obstinate. But I would so much rather go to my own room, if Mr. Harrop will not think me rude.'

'Now, sir,' she said, 'you see the force of example. This young lady has a speech in the back-ground, as you had; only hers is not ready prepared. She is composing it now.'

I could not help laughing, for I was that

very moment planning what I should say, if hard-pressed as to my reasons for wishing to retire.

'Now,' she went on, turning to me, 'confess your deceit. Having had your supper has very little if anything to do with your declining our society. State the truth directly.'

I laughed, but was silent.

'No answer. Then I must speak for you. The fact is, Mr. Harrop, our young friend is afflicted with a complaint called "nervousness." She is convalescent at present, but is afraid a descent to the dining-room might produce a relapse. I think this fear not without foundation, so, although contrary to my inclination, I must allow her to have her own way.'

'There's no cause for nervousness,' he said, in the old, kind tone. 'I wish you would come down and be happy with us all, for once. It would please me so much.'

'I will go with you, if you wish it,' I answered; 'but I should not be happy.'

'Then you must not come. You must, as your friend says, "have your own way," and be happy in that.'

I thanked him, and put out my hand to say 'Good-night.'

'One word, Mary. You must come to me to-morrow evening. I want to talk to you, and to find out how it is you have been so long here without my knowledge, &c. &c. &c. Will you come?'

'I should be very pleased to do so, but —but—I am not certain that it will be possible.'

'Why not?'

I hesitated. 'I will try to come.'

'Which means you will. There is no time to force you to make a distinct, and definite, and decided promise, such as you would tremble even at the thought of breaking; but I'll oblige you by considering you've already made it. Mrs. Chanter and our friend present intend favouring papa and myself with their society at the same date;

but you had better come hours before they do. Come directly after dinner. I want to have a long chat with you. Now, no arguing'—I was about to speak—'no arguing. You must do as you're bid. Good-night.'

She shook hands with me hurriedly, as if to prevent my expostulating. Then Mr. Harrop took my hand in his, as though to say 'Good-bye.'

'But you're not going to remain here,' he said. 'You will at least bear us company until our roads diverge.'

'No,' I answered; 'I would rather not. I should like to sit here quietly a little longer, and then when I'm sure the house is quite clear, I will slip upstairs unobserved.'

'You are right, Miss Launceston. It's a case of genuine nervousness in its worst form.'

'I'm afraid there's a mixture of cunning in this fresh outbreak,' said Marion. 'I think she rather wishes to steal the flowers when we're fairly off.'

'That's very easy to prevent, I hope.'

He looked round as he spoke, and taking a small pen-knife from his pocket, cut a few of the choicest near, and gave them all to me, excepting one, which he retained himself.

'Now, Gratitude will tie your hands,' he said, laughing. 'Good-night. I'm sorry you will not go down with us. Now, Miss Launceston. Indeed we shall get into trouble with my sister.'

Once more bidding me 'Good-bye,' my companions hurried away. As they went, I saw, in the dim light, that Mr. Harrop offered to my friend the flower he had retained. She took it smiling, and in a moment they were gone. I sat thinking vaguely for a few minutes, and then accomplished my object of slipping to my room unobserved.

But as I went I said to myself, wondering at my own calmness, 'I know he cannot fail to love and admire her as I do.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE next morning, while I was pondering on the best means to adopt in order to secure permission from Mrs. Chanter to my acceding to Marion's wishes, a quick knock at the door of the study was followed by the entrance of Fanny Harrop.

Without giving me time to acknowledge her distant 'Good morning,' both the little girls rushed up to her with deafening shouts and cries, whether of surprise or joy, or a mixture of both, it was difficult to me to determine. (Master Edward, luckily, was spending the day with his mamma, which was now the usual arrangement.)

'Oh, Fanny, we did not know you were home! How good of you to come in here,' &c. &c.

'Now, who would imagine I had only been away three days? One would think I had been on a six months' visit to see the fuss you make. Pray keep back,' she continued, pushing them away almost roughly, and glancing as she spoke at her elegant morning dress, to see if their embraces had disturbed its folds; 'you're not usually so fond of me. It's only the novelty of seeing me in your schoolroom, I suppose. It's not a very inviting place to come to, I must say, and you make me quite nervous and untidy with your demonstrations. Now, do go and sit down, there's good children,' as they still pressed round her, 'you should not romp and jump about like that. It's so unladylike, Miss Browne,' turning to me, 'and mamma objects to it so strongly.'

'*I* was not romping and jumping about,' I ventured to observe.

'No, not you, of course!' she said, looking puzzled at my remark, 'but Aura and Nellie. Mamma can't bear to see children

boisterous, and I know she would like you to check them.'

I made no reply. The little faces lost their smiles, and their owners returned to their seats much more calmly than they had quitted them. It began to appear to me that this girl possessed a peculiar talent for chilling all demonstration of feeling in everyone who addressed her.

'It makes my head ache so,' she went on, 'to be pulled about, and it spoils my dress as well, besides being so dreadfully ill-bred. Children should keep quiet, and wait to be spoken to.'

No one answered; and she continued to arrange her dress in silence.

'Miss Browne,' she resumed, after completing an *amateur* toilette by the aid of a small mirror which she had taken from her pocket, 'I came in here to speak to *you*. Uncle Charles has just been telling mamma that Marion—Miss Launceston, you know—asked you to spend this evening with her.'

'Yes,' I said, 'she did; and I want to go very much.'

'Whatever for?'

She opened her large blue eyes to their utmost extent, and waited for an answer; but I made none.

'Well, it's very odd to me,' she went on, 'how you can find pleasure in the prospect of spending hours upon hours with such a queer girl as she is. You may say alone with her, too, for we shan't be there till quite late; and she wants you to go as soon as ever you can, and I don't suppose, from what I remember of you, that you want anything better. She'll drive you mad, though, I warn you. She's twenty times worse than she was at the college. But you can start when you like—directly after dinner, if you please—and mamma says nurse is to stop with the children.'

'Thank you,' I said; 'she is very kind.'

'It's Uncle Charles you've to thank, not her; she only lets you go to please him, and

he only wants her to let you go because it will please Marion.'

It all seemed so natural and probable, and yet—in spite of the calmness I had felt the previous night—the words struck me with a greater pain than any I had endured in all the miserable past.

'It's no wonder uncle likes you,' she went on, 'and takes your part when he talks to mamma. Your being so fond of Marion is quite enough for him. The more you think of her, the higher you stand in his opinion.'

'Miss Launceston did not know till last night that I was here,' I observed. 'Your uncle did not know till then that she was more to me than the most ordinary acquaintance. I fancy you must be mistaken.'

'Well, he had a pretty good deal to say about you this morning—that's all I know; and I put it down to you and Marion being friends. He said it was no business of his—and there he's quite right—but you were shamefully neglected and badly used, and

mamma had no right to keep a governess if she couldn't treat her properly. And then I came in for *my* share because I'd never been in here to see you. He wasn't cross, you know—Uncle Charles never is—he was as quiet as a mouse over it ; but mamma was in a fine rage, and told him "she knew who she'd got to thank for his Quixote-ish outbreak"—I remembered that word Quixote-ish, because I didn't know what it meant—"and she had no intention of forgetting to whom she owed it." Uncle laughed at her, but he coloured up, and ending by telling me he wished me to come to you myself, and bear mamma's consent to your going out this evening. So I came, for I'm very fond of him ; and I'm sure if I'd known he wanted me to, I'd have come up and called upon you, ages ago.'

This was pleasant, at all events.

'Oh, I assure you you've been quite the rage since you ran off last night. Why you couldn't come in to supper I can't think—

mamma meant you to, she says so. And the way Mr. Graeme stared at you! He'll never hear the last of it—from Marion, at all events.'

'Stared at *me*?' I said.

'Yes—stared at *you*! Marion told him he looked at you as if he knew you—as if he were trying to find out some expression in your face that he had seen there ages ago. He seemed dreadfully annoyed at her remarks, and still more annoyed that we noticed his annoyance—but she only laughed at him, and said she was certain that if he'd never known you in this life he must have been acquainted with you in some previous state of existence. She knew the expression she had seen on his face too well to be mistaken. She was absolutely certain he had seen you somewhere before. He's quite a stranger to you, Miss Browne, is he not?'

There was a peculiar look on her face as she fixed her eyes on me, which made me think she had some particular motive,

which I could not fathom, for asking the question.

'Quite a stranger, Miss Harrop. I have never, to my knowledge, seen him before.'

The peculiar expression I had noticed vanished instantly.

'It's my belief, Miss Browne, that Marion's mad, so the less we talk of her the better. It's only you and Uncle Charles that think anything of her. Everything she does is always right with him, simply because it is she who does it. It irritates me worse than I was irritated by her at the college. I wish she had kept on rushing about abroad, and not have come annoying people here—taking people's uncles away from them.'

Her tone and manner were so exactly like those of her girlhood when anything disturbed her equanimity, that in spite of the pain her words gave me I could not hide my amusement.

'What are you laughing at?' she exclaimed sharply.

'I really hardly know. But does your uncle *say* he thinks so much of her?'

'Say it? Of course not! (Half the weight seemed lifted from my heart.) He never mentions her name if he can help it. He never speaks a word about her. It's not his way to speak much about anybody. It's what he *thinks* that annoys me.'

'But how do you know what he thinks?'

'How do I know! How absurd! Why, because I *do* know of course. If he only *would* speak,' she went on, 'it wouldn't irritate me so much. It's because he thinks without speaking that I'm so worried. If he'd come up to me, and say, "Well, Fanny, you're very pretty (as I know I am), but with all your prettiness you can't hold a candle to Marion Launceston, either for beauty or cleverness," then I could take him on his own ground, and tell him what a conceited stuck-up thing she is, thinking herself above everybody else; but how can I go to him and begin to tell him so, when he never mentions her name,

and never will be induced to join in any conversation about her ?'

'No,' I said; 'it would be rather awkward, I must confess, even though he's your uncle.'

'Of course it would; so what can I do but bear it all, whatever irritation it causes me ? I could endure it more easily even if it were you,' she went on, 'yes, even if it were *you*, but to prefer a disagreeable, conceited creature like that, whom I have always detested, to his own relations—his own flesh and blood, I may say—it's too irritating to be borne.'

'Nonsense,' I said, 'you worry yourself about nothing. It is not at all likely that he should care for a girl almost a stranger to him, more than for you, who are his own sister's child, and whose interests must always lie next his heart, good and generous as he is ! In fact, it's most unlikely,' (how eagerly I strove to believe my own words !) 'Your love for him is so great,' I went on, 'that it pre-

vents your judging rightly. You are mistaken. I am sure of it.'

'Then why is he going to marry her?' she exclaimed, pettishly.

There is no sort of pain in the world, I think, like the pain I felt then. No sort of misery, or blankness, or darkness like that which seized me, which spread before me, which blinded me. All the hopelessness and despair of the past seemed to me like the blessed light and sunshine of life, in comparison with the dreadful agony of that one moment.

'What's the matter with you, Miss Browne? Are you ill?'

'No, not at all. Why should I be ill?'

'I don't know. But you've turned so white.'

'It's only the light I'm sitting in,' I said, moving my chair so as to place my back to the window. 'A strong light always makes me look so white.'

'That's the question,' she resumed, appa-

rently satisfied with my ridiculous answer, but more likely, with her natural selfishness, forgetting everything but her own desire to give vent to her feelings—'that's the question. Why is he going to marry her? Not that I know that he is, or even that she would have him if he wanted her, which I don't believe he does—at all events yet, but I've no doubt in my own mind that it will end in that way, if she stays here much longer.'

I don't know what my feelings were *then.* A womanly longing to turn on my worrier and shake her was, I think, predominant, but I remained outwardly placid.

'However,' she went on, 'it's no use talking. *That* won't make it any better. I'm sick and tired of it all, and the best thing is to try and not think about it.'

She gave a little ladylike sigh, and took from her side a beautiful miniature watch studded with jewels.

'Dear me! How late it's getting; and

I'm not yet dressed for luncheon. I'd better go and see to myself at once.'

So saying, she rose from her seat with a sudden reassumption of the affected manner which, during the latter part of her conversation, she had entirely dispensed with.

'Well, good morning, Miss Browne. Mind you go to Marion as early as ever you like, and, depend upon it, I shall not go till as late as I like. Good-bye, chick-a-bids. Good little things for keeping so quiet. Sister Fanny will come in soon again and see you.'

She sailed out of the room with the same stately air she had worn on entering it, and I was left with the children and my reflections —the latter none of the pleasantest.

'Did he love her?' That was the question that kept ringing in my ears. With the power strong in him of appreciating the wealth of Intellect and Beauty that Nature had so lavishly lavished upon her, it seemed to me impossible but that he must be at-

tracted towards her with a force which, even if willing to do so, he must be almost unable to resist. But still this might be so without any reciprocity of feeling on her part. Did *she* love *him*? The chances seemed to me to be equally balanced. It might be that she did. It might be that she did not. Even though blinded in many ways by my own feelings, I could weigh calmly the qualities in his nature which would attract with those which would not attract her, and in doing so I felt that I could arrive at no definite conclusion. 'Time will show,' I said to myself. 'I must wait patiently for the result of the present state of things.' And with this thought came back to me the dreadful consciousness, that, whatever that result might be, there was, alas! for me, but one beginning and one ending—and they were that he loved me not.

With this consciousness strong upon me, I made a resolution. This resolution was—to fight—to struggle with, and conquer, my

useless love (if it is love, I said). I resolved to put it aside thoroughly, and have done with it. This resolution, once formed, brought at first strength and peace; and then, suddenly, a miserable desolation at the thought of parting with a feeling that I had cherished so long. I loved the love which I felt, and dreaded to break from it. It seemed to me that when that should be gone I should actually miss it, as one misses a near and dear friend.

Again, it seemed so dreary to think of that strange future when the object of my passion should be to me an object of indifference. Whatever might be the bitterness of the present there was still, I told myself, something to live for, as long as my love remained. When that went all would be a blank. Even the excitement of my past unhappiness would be then enviable, a thing which, in my utter desolation, I should long to clasp back again and welcome. And yet, believing this, I still resolved to conquer the state of feeling of which I felt ashamed.

Early in the afternoon of the morning the events of which I have narrated, I left the schoolroom and began to dress myself hurriedly for my visit. As I was doing so, the thought crossed my mind that I must not forget to ascertain the way to Marion's home. Hurriedly completing my toilette, I hastened to the study and endeavoured to gain the required information from one of my pupils.

'I really don't know, Miss Browne,' said the elder young lady; 'you see, we so seldom see mamma, or go out, that we never know anything; I daresay, though, Uncle Charles can tell you. If you like, I'll go and ask him. He's in his room, I heard him come up just now.'

'Not on any account,' I exclaimed; 'you mustn't trouble him. Now I think of it, I dare say I can find my way without assistance.'

I had no more idea of the road than I had of the road to the moon, but at the moment I would as soon have set out on a journey to that planet as have sought the information

I wanted from the source the child suggested. I was wondering what to do when the nurse entered the room.

'Nurse,' said my indefatigable little friend, 'where does Miss Launceston live?'

'I scarcely know, Miss Aura, except that it's nearly a straight line from here, and that the house is a white one, and stands alone, the other side of some fields. I could find it myself, Miss,' she added, turning to me, 'because I went there once with Master Edward to take a letter, but I couldn't direct anybody. Mr. Harrop could tell you, I've no doubt. He's in his room. Shall I knock and——'

'No, thank you,' I interrupted. 'If it's a straight line and a house standing by itself, I have no doubt it will be quite easy to me to find. Good-bye, Aura and Nellie.'

The former responded with wide-open eyes at my independence. A minute after I was in the street and my journey in progress.

When I had closed the garden gate I turned to the right and walked on slowly,

with a sigh of relief at breathing the fresh, clear air, and escaping—for once, by myself—from the dull house with its wearisome occupations. I was free from the observation of others without the uncomfortable consciousness that only a door or two separated me from it, and in the unwonted pleasure of temporary liberty I experienced, for a time, a quiet feeling of content to which I had long been a stranger. Crossing some fields, golden with the light of the bright autumn sun, far before me lay all the rich country of the south, spreading for miles, like a gay panorama. Hill and dale and streamlet; cattle feeding in the meadows; sheep, by hundreds, dotting the downs, and looking in the distance like immovable specks; clusters of thick dark trees with the mysterious mist of the early autumn evening already gathering round them; and, over head, masses of silver-edged clouds, radiant with the brightness of the half-hidden sun. The loneliness of the place almost frightened me, but I walked on quietly, now

gazing in one direction, now in another, forgetful at length of everything but the wealth of Nature before me, softly wondering at the mellow beauty of every fresh gleam of landscape.

It was not till I had emerged from the fields, and arrived at a stream directly in my path, by which my journey was brought to a temporary close, that the object of that journey returned to my mind. Then I reflected. Was I going right? Or had I, in my musing, wandered from the straight line I had been directed to pursue? Certainly no part of that direction had been to wade across water, yet here it flowed directly in front of me; and I must either cross it by some, at present, occult means, or deviate from the straight path, which I had been warned not to do. There was no doubt of it—I had missed my way.

It was not a pleasant conviction; particularly when, upon looking round in hopes of seeing some one from whom to seek information,

my eyes fell on anything but a human being. Vain was my search. There was no one in sight, and, in great perplexity, I stood gazing into the water, hesitating as to whether I should retrace my steps or wait till some other creature of my own kind should appear on the scene of action.

As it happened, I had but little time for consideration. A moment after assuming my doubting position, I raised my eyes and saw immediately a figure approaching in the distance from the road to my left. As it came nearer I saw that it was the figure of a man, but I could scarcely see the face at all, for his head was bent down towards something he held in his hand. As my eyes fell on this man, a curious feeling of trepidation came over me, for which at the time I did not try to account, but which, in my recollection of it the next day, I strove to attribute to a natural timidity incidental to the circumstances of the moment. Shaking off this feeling as much as possible, I hastily decided that the best plan

would be to go towards this man—especially as he had the appearance of a gentleman—and ask him if he knew of a family named Launceston living in the neighbourhood, and, if so, if he could direct me on my road.

Acting upon this decision, I went towards him. As we approached each other, I saw that he was walking slowly, and that that which he held in his hand was a journal or paper of some kind which he was reading as he walked. I saw also that he was quite young, and had a certain careless, confident air, which seemed to impress me with a vague idea that I had, in some far distant time, seen the same figure walking the same road with the same careless, confident carriage.

This impression was so momentary that at the time I was scarcely conscious of it, and yet I recollected it afterwards. As he came nearer, I perceived that occasionally he left off reading and stood still thinking. When I saw how young he was, and that though

dressed as a gentleman, he was not, to my idea, the kind of man whom, under the circumstances, I should care to accost, I said to myself: 'If I can pass without his noticing me, I will not speak, but wait till some one else comes by.'

As I made this resolution, he again raised his head from the paper, and evidently amused at some portion of its contents, laughed so loudly that, although I was still a considerable distance from him, I heard him distinctly. It was not a pleasant laugh. It made me determined to pass him without addressing him, whether he observed me or not.

As he laughed he folded the paper, and put it in his pocket, holding it there. Then he raised his eyes, and looking, for the first time, straight before him, saw me approaching.

He had an eye-glass dangling in front of him. Directly he perceived me, he placed it in one of his eyes and looked full at me. As

he did so, I saw that he was the gentleman who had sung the German song in Mrs. Chanter's drawing-room on the previous evening.

CHAPTER XXV.

IMMEDIATELY upon recognising him, I felt more than ever disinclined to speak to him; but I saw at once, that though my dress was totally different from that which I had worn the night before, and though my features were almost entirely hidden by a thick veil, which, upon first seeing him in the distance, I had drawn down over my face, yet he knew me instantly. As his first glance of recognition fell upon me, I fancied he started, as a person starts at an unpleasant surprise; but if this were so, he instantly recovered himself, and quickening his pace, advanced to meet me. When I was sufficiently near to him, I bowed distantly, intending to pass on. He raised his hat, but instead of allowing me to go by, he stopped deliberately in my path.

'Good afternoon,' he said.

'Good afternoon,' I answered, in a sufficiently cool manner to show that I would rather proceed on my way than stay talking with him; but he stood so directly in front of me, that I could not do as I wished without appearing rude; so making a virtue of a necessity, I stood still.

'I did not expect to have this pleasure,' he said. 'Are you, like myself, enjoying a country walk?'

'No,' I answered, looking straight at him, for I was annoyed at the freedom of his manner, and wished him to see that I was so. 'I was not walking for pleasure, I came this way to meet you, and ask you a question.'

Instantaneously, as the last words left my lips, I saw with surprise, and for the moment with unspeakable fear, that a mysterious change had come over him. His face had turned white, his mouth was working nervously, and his eyes were full of a fierce look of terror or anger, or both combined, which

filled me with consternation. I could only stare blankly at him with a face probably as white as his own.

'Speak, if you will,' he gasped; 'but you have no proofs, you can do me no harm, while with one word, I could——'

He stopped suddenly, for with the wild fear that I was standing face to face with a madman, I obeyed my first impulse to escape, and moved to do so. As I endeavoured to rush past him, he seized my two arms, whirled me half round, with my back to the water, held me firmly as far from him as possible, and looked at me with the most evil expression I had ever seen on the face of a human being.

'Now,' he said slowly, every word that fell from his lips seeming to drop on me and hurt me, 'if it were worth my while, I should think no more of pushing you backwards into that water, and holding you there till you could never ask questions nor answer them any more, than I should of throwing a

stone into it. Do you understand? Now, what do you want to ask me?'

I tried to scream, but in my terror was unable to utter a sound. I moved my head from side to side, there was no help near. Then, with a sudden and violent effort, I almost wrenched myself from the grasp, which simply tightened as I did so and prevented all possibility of escape.

'Will you tell me what you came to say? How did you know you should meet me? I don't believe you planned it. It is simply accidental, and you take advantage of the accident to make me think——'

With a sudden effort I regained the power of speech. 'I don't know what you mean,' I said, my voice sounding to me in some strange way as if some one else were speaking for me. 'I don't know what you mean. I never thought to see you here till I did see you. I saw you coming along, not knowing it was you, and I came to meet you to ask you if you knew which was Mr.

Launceston's house. I am going there, but did not know which way to turn.'

He had never moved his eyes from my face from the moment he had first seen me. He did not move them now, but his own face lost something of its dread and terror, while the eagerness of his scrutiny of me increased to such an extent, that it seemed as if he would read every thought of my soul. In another moment he burst into a harsh laugh, then gradually loosening his grasp on my arms, though still retaining such a hold on them that I was too wise to make another attempt to escape, he turned me away from my sickening proximity to the stream.

'You are very clever, and I, a fool,' he said in a hesitating manner. 'You are clever, and I, a perfect fool, in comparison; but you do not leave me now till matters are set straight, and I know what ground I am standing on.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I stammered again.

'All right,' he said, with a quick cunning look, which seemed to say, 'You know my meaning well enough, but if you so prefer it, I will humour your assumption of ignorance.' 'All right, we understand each other. You know nothing, of course. You don't know *me*, do you? You don't know who you are yourself, do you? You don't even know your own name!'

I was too mystified to do anything but stare at him. 'Now,' he went on, 'we are agreed, you see; we are both quite certain that you know nothing. But just listen to me. Of course, I have the greatest confidence in you—and—and all that sort of thing, but I am never content to remain in a state of doubt on any subject on which I prefer certainty. So, we'll make sure of this matter. You are, I am aware, what is called a conscientious person, and would not be likely to break a solemn oath solemnly taken. Just repeat what I say, if you please. I swear by——'

'I will not say it,' I interrupted, but in another moment I found myself in sheer terror repeating the words after him. It is needless to recapitulate here the awful oath he compelled me to take, that I would never reveal to any living creature, without his permission, who, or what he was; never disclose any facts connected with his past history of which I was at present cognisant, or should hereafter become so; never speak of this interview to anyone, under any circumstances whatever, &c., &c. I said the words after him with a vague impression that he was either insane, or mistook me for some one else.

As the last syllable died on my pale lips, he released my arms so suddenly, that, having been inclining from him during the whole time he held me, I lost my balance, my foot slipped on the damp grass, and I fell sideways into the water. To struggle up again was the work of a moment, but my cloak and hat, and part of my dress, were

thoroughly wetted. My companion removed the two former in a gentle manner, and shook them for me, while I tried to wring the water from the latter. I believe I should have run off at this juncture, leaving my out-door garments behind me, but the impression was now so strong on my mind that I had been mistaken for some other person, that I determined before escaping to ascertain if I was right or not.

'You are free now,' he said, 'but the whole affair has been entirely, and solely, your own fault. An amicable arrangement would have been much more pleasant, though this, after all, is the safest, I fancy.'

'Do you know who I am?' I broke in, plunging into my subject without heeding his remarks. 'Do you know who I am, beyond the fact of my being Mrs. Chanter's governess? I think you have an idea that I am some one whom I am not.'

'Not at all,' he interrupted, with the same cunning look in his eyes, which I had

noticed there once previously. 'Not at all; I took you when I had the pleasure of passing an hour in your society last evening, for Miss Mary Browne, daughter of the late Dr. John Louis Browne, of Eastbury, Wiltshire. In fact, I had been informed by a lady who professed to know it for a certainty that you were that identical person; but of course—if you desire it should be so—it is a mistake. You are Miss Browne of London, or Jericho, or Scotland, or Ireland, or anywhere you like. I should be very sorry to interfere with any of your private arrangements in any way.'

I was more mystified than ever. I was about to speak again, though what I purposed saying has escaped my memory, when my eyes met a welcome sight. I saw Mr. Harrop crossing a stile into the very field where we were standing.

'By Jove,' exclaimed my companion, recognising him, it seemed, at the same moment as myself, 'there's a friend of ours! he's just in time.'

He gave me back my hat and cloak, which he had still continued to shake during the latter part of our conversation; and, as he did so, Mr. Harrop, who had evidently just caught sight of us—he was about a hundred yards off—came on quickly. He was smoking a cigar. When he had arrived at a short distance from us, Mr. Graeme called to him.

'Come on, my friend,' he said; 'you're just in time to see the end of it all. I've but now had the painful pleasure of restoring Miss Browne to a state of consciousness.'

'What has happened?' exclaimed the new comer. 'What has been the matter?'

'Nothing very serious. You needn't look alarmed. I found this young lady seated on the grass almost fainting. Before I could get any water she was gone, as people say, and, as I have already stated, I have had the painful pleasure of bringing her to life again.'

The gentleman he addressed looked first

at me, then at the speaker, with a curious expression of doubt and hesitation on his face, then turning again to me, remarked kindly:

'You are not strong, I fear. Why did you venture so far from home by yourself?'

I explained, though doubtless not very intelligibly, the circumstances which had led to my doing so.

'You seem to have a talent for opening wrong doors, and wandering into mistaken paths,' he said, laughing. 'When you left "The Laurels," you should have taken the opposite direction to that which you selected.'

'How very stupid I must be!'

'Young ladies are, as a rule, not clever at finding their way about strange neighbourhoods. You will be wiser another time, perhaps. Your present mistake is easily remedied. There is a winding path over the fields from here to Miss Launceston's house.'

It was the first time I had ever heard

him say her name. Utterly forgetting for the moment all but that unspeakable pain, which, alas! I so often felt, I looked at him narrowly. One thing was certain. There was no sign in his face that the name he had uttered was dearer to him than the name of any other woman.

'Will you walk there, or go home?' he continued. 'The former will be best, I think. You will receive more care and attention from Miss Launceston than you would at "The Laurels."'

I knew this was true; but the thought that he also knew it, filled my unreasoning heart with a fresh pang of fear and jealousy. 'Yes, I'll go to her,' I said.

'Im glad to hear your decision. Your friend was so anxious to see you early, but it is getting late now.'

'Which way am I to take?'

'I'll see you to the house, if you will allow me.'

'Really, this is too bad,' broke in Mr.

Graeme. 'I find a young lady fainting, I have the happy privilege of conducing to her recovery, and spoiling her clothes with water while doing so, and then up comes a third party and quietly carries her off, apparently without the slightest consciousness that such a being as myself is in existence.'

Mr. Harrop burst out laughing, a cheerful hearty laugh. All trace of the expression his face had worn during the first few moments of our interview had passed away.

'Well, it is too bad, I must confess. But, surely, Miss Browne has acknowledged your kindness to begin with?'

'Oh, yes! fifty times,' he said, hurriedly. 'I'm tired of thanks. All I want now is to share your newly-acquired privilege of escorting the young lady to her destination.'

'That's not in my power to grant,' was the laughing answer. 'The young lady must dispose of such a request with her own lips.'

'She will not refuse it, I know.' So saying, he offered me his arm.

'You must excuse me,' I said. 'My dress is still damp, I wish to keep it clear of the ground, and my hands will be engaged.' I tried to smile as I spoke, and, glancing at Mr. Harrop, I saw the same look of doubt or suspicion cross his face which it had worn for a moment when Mr. Graeme had given his explanation of the circumstances in which we had been discovered.

'How wet your mantle is, Miss Browne!' he said, as we all turned and walked on together; 'and your dress too! Mr. Graeme must have performed his duty with a most excellent will. Did your garments require water as well as your face?'

'Unfortunately,' said Mr. Graeme, 'having nothing to carry the water in to Miss Browne, I carried Miss Browne to the water, and in my excitement in removing her cloak I let it fall into the stream. Upon rescuing it I threw it inadvertently upon her

hat, which was resting on her dress, and when she felt better and stood upon her feet, we found that a general inundation of her clothes had been the natural consequences of my imprudence.'

'Very clever, I must say,' said Mr. Harrop. But the peculiar expression of his countenance deepened instead of fading.

'Now,' exclaimed Mr. Graeme, 'suppose we change the subject to something more cheerful. What do you think of the country about here, Miss Browne? Have you seen much of it yet?'

And from this arose a conversation (in which, however, I took little part) respecting the harvest, the shooting season, &c., interspersed with enquiries from both gentlemen as to the state of my health, until the white house of the Launcestons came in view.

'Now, Miss Browne,' said Mr. Harrop, 'I must see you safely in, and confide you to your friend's care, or I shall feel my duty is not completed.'

'Thanks, my dear fellow,' said Mr. Graeme, 'that will make an excuse for my entrance also. I trust the Queen of Pride and Beauty will receive us amicably.'

Mr. Harrop made no reply, but gave a quick, half-amused glance at the speaker, then turned to me.

'Now, you can discard the dress, and take my arm up the steps?'

'Thank you,' I said, and took it.

Mr. Graeme went before us, bowing an apology to me as he did so, knocked and rang, whistled softly, turned his eyes to the ground, and then looked with a certain evil expression, first at me, and then at Mr. Harrop. I noticed it, though the latter did not.

At this moment the door was opened. My friend with the evil look immediately recovered his ordinary expression, and taking the initiative, enquired politely if Miss Launceston was at home.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Miss Launceston was at home. Would we walk in?

We did so, and found her seated in the drawing-room. I was the first to enter, and on my appearance she rose hastily, advancing to meet me with a cry of welcome, and a manner so like that of her old school-days, that she seemed to me for the moment the childish girl of years ago, with the womanliness and stateliness of the night before vanished utterly. Upon seeing by whom I was accompanied, she checked herself quickly, to accord to her more dignified visitors a more dignified welcome.

'I am very glad to see you all,' she said, looking at Mr. Harrop; 'but where are Mrs. Chanter and Fanny?'

'Not here yet, as you perceive. A short chapter of accidents induced me to undertake to see Miss Browne into your society; and having done so, my business now is to return to "The Laurels" and attend my sister into your presence.'

'Accidents?' she asked, laughing. 'What has Mary been doing?'

Mr. Graeme, evidently thinking it was time to speak, now broke in with an account of the afternoon's proceedings similar to that which he had given to Mr. Harrop. The latter smiled pleasantly while this was in progress, but kept his eyes fixed on the face of the speaker.

'And your clothes must be quite wet, Mary. You are taking cold all this time.' This was the only comment she made, walking towards me as she spoke, and removing my hat and cloak. 'Do you feel ill now?' she added. Then putting her hand on my dress, 'Why, you are wet through, as people say. What have you been doing to her, Mr. Graeme?'

'I have explained once, Miss Launceston.'

'I think you must have been trying to drown her,' she went on, not heeding his remark. 'How pale you look, Mary. You must feel very ill, I'm sure.'

There were wine and cakes on the table. She gave me some of the former and bade me drink it instantly. 'Now you will soon be better, only we must take off that wet dress.'

'And we must take our departure,' said Mr. Harrop. 'The sooner we go, the sooner will my honoured sister be escorted to her destination. I promised to be in for her some half-hour back. Now, my friend, are you ready?'

The 'friend' was examining some rare flowers in a vase on a side-table.

'Are you a botanist, Miss Launceston?' he asked, quietly, without replying to Mr. Harrop.

'A very unskilled one. Do you want to know the names of any of those flowers?'

'Yes. What is this?'

'I've never seen it before,' she said, 'and can give you no information about it. Do you wish to know the class and order, &c.?' she added with a comical look.

'Oh! Not at all, merely the name. The next best thing to the possession of a thing one admires, is to be able to think of it as something real and defined—that is——'

'I don't quite understand you,' she interrupted; 'but as you can't have the second gratification, you must have the first.'

As she spoke, she took from the vase the subject of discussion and presented it to him. He bowed and fixed it in the button-hole of his coat.

'I wish,' he said, 'it were possible for me to obtain all I admire and covet as easily as this has been obtained; how can I thank you?'

'Oh! I require no thanks—thank you.'

'Then I attempt none. But while I think of it,' he added, putting his hand in

his pocket, and bringing out what appeared to me to be the paper he had been reading when I first saw him in the distance —'while I think of it, I must ask you to oblige me by looking over an article in this which I am sure will interest you very much. It will be adding another favour to the one already bestowed.'

'How so?' she asked, smiling and taking the paper from his hand.

'By giving me the knowledge that you think me possibly capable of finding something to interest you.'

'What fine speeches all you gentlemen make! Do you study the art at your schools and colleges, unknown to the poor weak creatures they are supposed to be all-powerful in deceiving? But which is the article you speak of?' she added, handing the paper back to him. 'Am I to find it unaided?'

As he put out his hand to take it, she drew it away hastily and held it behind her back, as he answered.

'If you were a young lady who would be likely to tell me you admired my choice merely out of compliment to myself, whether it was so or not, I should decidedly say "yes." As it is——'

'As it is,' she interrupted, quietly putting the paper in her pocket, 'I'll find it myself; I'm sure I shall know the one you mean. If I do not, I'll confess what a grand mistake I've made in imagining my tastes and ideas—on one class of subjects at least—to be similar to yours.'

'Agreed,' he said; 'I've no fear of the result. Now I am quite ready to accompany you,' he added, turning to Mr. Harrop.

That gentleman, during the discussion, had taken up a photographic album, and had been to all appearance absorbed in its contents.

'I'm quite ready,' he answered, closing the book. 'Good afternoon, for the present, Miss Launceston.'

She put out her hand. 'Good-bye. Be

quick back. I'm expecting papa in from his walk every moment; and he'll be vexed when he hears you can't be here again for more than an hour. Run all the way.'

A kind 'good-bye' to me from Mr. Harrop, and a bow from Mr. Graeme, followed by a more deferential one for Marion, and we were left alone. The two gentlemen walked down the garden arm-in-arm. My companion watched them for a moment, and then broke into her old gay laugh.

'How strange it is, Mary, that men so often talk to women as if they were children or idiots, or as if it pleased women themselves to be treated as one or the other. I suppose it is because many of us really do like it, that men think themselves justified in adopting the same tone towards us all.'

'I suppose so,' I answered, wearily. As I spoke, her face changed quickly.

'How cruel, and wicked, and careless, and selfish I am!' she exclaimed. 'I stand here talking nonsense, while you are ill and tired,

and never offer to assist you. Come up at once, and get your wet clothes off. I've been longing to see you—longing so much to see you, Mary.'

She led me up a wide staircase into a small room luxuriously furnished, and from thence into a large bedroom opening from it.

'Now,' she said, helping to take off my dress, 'now, poor little girl, you shall soon be dry again.'

She summoned a servant, committing to her care the discarded robe, wrapped a large shawl round me, led me back into the adjoining room, and seated me on a couch.

'Are you better now?'

'Yes, much better, thank you,' I answered, laughing.

'Well enough to tell me what made you ill?'

I had been dreading this. A faint feeling of terror and fear came over me.

'Why, it makes you tremble and turn pale

even to hear me refer to it,' she said, looking at me anxiously. 'Do you not like to tell me what caused your faintness?'

'I have often felt faint lately,' I answered, struggling to speak clearly. 'I feel so now, but I shall soon get over it.'

'It is thoughtless of me to speak to you about it. I am so unperceptive. However, I will remedy my error by beginning to talk of something else. What do you think of my little *sanctum*?'

'It's delightful.'

'All my own, you know. No one enters without permission.'

I glanced round. There were two book-cases in the room, full of choice books. She followed the direction of my eyes with an eager look of pleasure.

'Glorious! is it not? Shakspeare, Milton, Byron, Chaucer—everyone you could wish to make acquaintance with. There were several furnished houses to be let about here, and papa allowed me to make my

choice among them. I chose this because of the books, taking care to select this room as my very own, my own private domain.'

'Are you still so fond of reading?'

'Yes, as devoted as ever. You see, I know so little. The more I read, the more I find out my own ignorance. The more I learn, the larger seems the world of unknown treasures that I shall never be able to explore.'

'What a strange girl you are, Marion!'

'Strange?' she said; 'how strange?'

'Why, so different from others.'

'How different?'

'Why—other girls of your age and in your position think of dress, and pleasure, and flirting, and getting married, and things of that kind.'

'I suppose so. And so do I.'

'Do you really?'

'Of course I do. And not only that, but "other girls," as you call them, think of other things as well as of the interesting topics you

have mentioned, though it may not appear so to you.'

'Do they?'

'Yes, occasionally. There is no human being on earth—no woman even—devoted wholly and entirely to trifles. There is no human heart, however hollow, and shallow, and vain, but at times it is filled with a great yearning for something better than the false shadow it pursues, something capable of bringing to it the peace it never feels. Sometimes, Mary, when my own blindness and wilfulness make me hate myself, I ask myself if there is any use in struggling and striving. I say I had better—'

'But of what are you speaking, Marion? For what do you strive and struggle? I don't understand.'

'Listen to me. Whom do you love best in all the world? Whose interest is always next your heart? Yourself—your own. Is it not so?'

'But, Marion, it is so with everyone.'

'It is so with us all,' she repeated sadly, 'at least with nearly all. It is the same almost always. And yet it seems to me that in that fact lies all the misery of our race. If that sweet precept, "Love thy neighbour as thyself," were carried out—if we could all forget the deity we have all set up, how different things would be. That is what I strive for, Mary, but oh! how vainly. I strive to love others even better than myself!'

She spoke in a dreamy, quiet way; more as though she were speaking to herself than to me.

'It is strange,' she went on, 'how few of all the earnest men and women in the world, how few make this one thing their object. Some strive for fame, some for knowledge, some for wisdom, and, in the race, noble though they may be, they hinder, and hurt, and wound each other, and how often the whole end is Self! Self!! Self!!! And yet this is the grandest of all things—the brightest and the purest, and the best—the greatest

object for which it is possible to live—this power to love others better than ourselves. This perfect unselfishness, this Universal Love, which if attained by all would make men, men no longer, but with its divine perfection would make them also divine!'

'But, Marion,' I said, 'who could attain to this? As you say, it is impossible that all should do so, and if we could and did we should be no longer the beings that we are, we should be faultless.' I felt I was getting out of my depth, and talking vaguely, but I went on. 'And yet,' I said, 'we shall be so some time, but we must die first, you know. We must die before——'

'Yes,' she said, sighing, 'you are right. We must die. . . . . Die,' she repeated. 'It is a terrible word, Mary; it seems at times to be killing my life when I hear it uttered. We must die! We must all *die.* All the wretchedness of it, all the despair of it, lies in that——' she broke off abruptly, and then went on in a calmer tone.

'Sometimes I think of it till I can think no longer, it is so strange and fearful. Philosophers tell us that Evil is a necessity; I know that with Good alone this world would be Heaven, with Evil alone it would be Hell; but I ask myself why should this necessity (if necessity it is) always be? It seems to me that but for this dreadful Death, Evil would, in time, gradually, though surely, cease to exist. I believe there is no human mind, however debased and degraded, but would in the course of years feel its degradation, and begin the noble contest that must end in Victory; only Death steps in—this mighty Death steps in—and ruins all!'

'Are you so afraid of Death, Marion?'

'No; you do not understand me. I never fear—I should not fear Death, of all things. But I hate it, the very thought of it is hateful to me. I feel sometimes that when it comes, I will struggle against it—struggle and fight against it with all my will and strength; and

even when it conquers, I will die opposing it. But I do not *fear*. I can't tell what fear is.'

There was in my mind some indistinct apprehension of the train of thought which had led to her utterance of such words, but, viewed by the light of the simple truths I had believed from childhood, the words themselves seemed to me as blasphemy, and I trembled.

'Death has been conquered for us, Marion,' I said. 'We know we have the victory at last. It is only our bodies that even die for a time, or rather sleep. We know it is only——'

'It is enough,' she said. 'Look at me. Sometimes other thoughts come over me, thoughts more natural to a weak, vain girl. Vanity and weakness are strong in me, though you may not think it. Look at all this beauty which men admire and women envy—this beauty which makes men love and worship me, and women hate, and speak evil of me. There are moments when, gaz-

ing on it myself, I hate myself for possessing it; there have been moments when the thought that, even while I gazed upon it, it was surely, though imperceptibly, fading, and changing to ugliness and decay, has made me long to deface and spoil it with my own hands, that it might no longer taunt me with the bitter truth that inexorable Time must eventually destroy it utterly.'

'Oh, Marion! Marion!'

'It is true,' she said passionately. 'I can't bear to think of being even physically inferior to what I am now. I can't bear to think even of *that*. But it fills me with anger when I feel that my mind——'

I knew what she was going to say.

'But, Marion,' I interrupted, 'surely you know our souls can never die. Our minds, though apparently in some cases——'

'I can't understand it,' she broke in. 'I can't see it. Mary, we *know* nothing——'

'The Bible says, Marion, that——'

As I began speaking a quick change

came over her earnest face, and she laughed quietly.

'My dear little child. Don't let us bring that in. Let us talk of something else. Do you know what "polemical discussions" mean? If not, I'll tell you. But you know, I see. Let us avoid them, and for the future I'll keep my speculations, and discontent with the lot of humanity, to myself.'

'But, Marion—one word. Don't you believe the Bible? Are you not a Christian?'

'Come, these are unfair questions. No more. I have been unwise in leading up to them. I will question you instead. Answer me. Have you ever read "Hamlet?"'

'Yes; several times.'

'And what impression did it make on you?'

'I can't tell. I liked it very much.'

'Liked it very much!' she repeated, with a kind of mild contempt in her tone. Then, seeing I looked hurt, she put her arm round me fondly as she went on. 'I have been

reading it to-day,' she said. 'It has such a fascination for me, that whenever I open Shakspeare. I seem to turn to it unconconsciously, and con it over. I shall never forget the first time I read it. It seemed to me that I saw a reflection of myself looking at me. All the vague doubts and speculations which had haunted my mind for so long had found speech in this man, and fell from his lips in language. If I may use the expression, I seemed to see myself put into words. He, or rather Shakspeare through him, had put my indistinct thoughts into tangible form, and they lay before me stamped with the genius that shows its might in being able to express itself. I find so few people in the world,' she went on, after a few moments' silence, 'I find so few people who understand me, or comprehend what I feel on subjects of this kind. But when I do meet with one of these few, I seem to know it intuitively; almost without conversation, almost without a word or look. It is to

me as though my soul, journeying among foreigners, had met with one of the same country as itself; as though I saw——' she paused suddenly. 'Now, Mary, we'll talk of something else, or I shall get misty and dreamy, and go mooning about all the evening, instead of devoting myself to the amusement of our select company. Besides, you look half frightened. What is it?'

'Nothing; I'm not frightened, but it grieves me to hear you speak on religious subjects as you have been speaking now.'

'I know that,' she interrupted; 'but you need not let my wickedness, as you no doubt think it, pain you—you dear, kind little heart! If I am wrong now, I shall be right in time. My "wrongness" will not last for ever.'

'Time may not be given you,' I urged.

'Do I look, then, as if I were about to die?' she exclaimed, smiling.

'Not at all,' I answered, gazing on the bright face, radiant with beauty and health, and now wearing an expression of careless

gaiety. 'Death and yourself are, to all appearance, far distant from each other. A stranger looking at you might think you had never even heard his name; but he comes in all shapes and disguises, in all places, and at all hours, and who can tell that he is not near you even now? Then, Marion, if you are wrong, what power shall set you right? What power can aid you?'

'I do not fear,' she said. 'If—to take you on your own ground—if to die in error is to suffer everlasting punishment, then is it also true that the eager desire for truth can never be quenched in death till truth is attained. Does your Bible teach you that the Almighty Author and Source of Truth would see His creature striving for that which He has urged him to attain, and then—perhaps even while his effort was at the strongest—prevent all further effort by striking him with eternal punishment for his hitherto non-success? Such a thought is blasphemy. No, Mary, one thing—I mean

according to your creed—is certain; and that is, that were I to die this moment, I must, however unconscious I may be of the fact, have attained to truth; but if I have not attained it, Death, with regard to me, is for the time powerless, is for the time dead. "Seek, and ye shall find." Those words contain the proof of what I say.'

'You talk so strangely, Marion.'

'Then let us speak on subjects on which my ideas may not be "strange," as you call it. Why talk of these things at all? It can do no good,' she added sadly. Then, after a pause, 'Now, tell me. What do you think of your new friend, Mr. Graeme?'

I made no reply.

'Why don't you answer? Can't you turn your mind so suddenly from grave to gay?'

'It is not that,' I answered, 'but I am scarcely competent to form a judgment respecting a person I have only met twice.'

'Of course—I forgot that—but still, what *do* you think of him?'

'I would rather not express my opinion.'

'Oh, very good. We'll put him off then. Though our fair friend, Fanny, would not be flattered, if she knew it.'

'What has *she* to do with him?'

'What, indeed? Can you ask? Can you not see, madam?'

'Are they engaged? Are they to be married?' I exclaimed, recollecting suddenly various incidents which seemed to confirm my newly conceived idea. 'You don't mean they are to be married?'

'Certainly; and very shortly, too.'

'Are they suited to each other, Marion?'

'Suited? What *can* you mean? People don't think of that now-a-days, my dear. Money or love is the nineteenth century motive power of marriage. Sometimes the former, sometimes the latter, and as often as either—I quite forgot that in my summing up—a shrewd mixture of both. But the idea of asking whether two people about to be married are suited to each other! As if

they were likely to give such a subject even a passing reflection. I thought you were wiser, Mary!'

'But they ought to be, ought they not?' I asked innocently.

'What ought to be, and what is, are, ordinarily, two distinct and different things. Mr. Graeme and Miss Harrop have engaged to marry, therefore we conclude they are fascinated with each other, or one of the two has a fortune, or both, perhaps, &c. &c., and there the matter ends—at all events, for us. *We* have nothing more to do with it. The world must mind its own business, and not pry and interfere, and want to know too much.'

'Fanny is very pretty,' I said thoughtfully.

'Very; and all this French affectation improves her.'

'How can affectation improve anyone, Marion?' I asked, laughing. 'Don't be so absurd.'

'Well, isn't she prettier than when she left the college?'

'I don't know. Yes, she is; at least I don't think her face is altered for the better—but yet——'

'Exactly so,' she interrupted. 'Her face is not more beautiful than it used to be, and yet, in effect, she's much prettier than during her bread-and-butter days. She's more engaging—and attractive—and—and so on. She was not naturally gifted with fascinating manners, I think.'

'No!' I said, laughing. 'She was anything but fascinating four years ago.'

'Well, these indescribable nothings which make her now so charming have been acquired abroad. Vulgarly speaking, it's French polish, and so good of its kind, that no wonder it's taken by some people to be the real article. Now, is not "affectation" the right word?'

'Yes—perhaps it is. I begin to see what you mean.'

'And you'll see something else in time. One of these days, if you should chance to

be alone with her, and any little feeling, which she cannot control, should assail her, she'll give vent to it, *minus* the French varnish, and lo! the Fanny Harrop of old undisguised before you.'

'How true!' I said, laughing. 'I saw it this morning.'

'Did you really? Well, have patience, and you'll doubtless see it again. But it's not a pretty sight. And yet, how charming she is! They say wherever she goes she "succeeds," as it is called.'

'I don't see that she is as beautiful as all that,' I said shortly.

'You don't admire the style, perhaps. Do you know that her hair and eyes made a perfect *furore* in Italy?'

'I didn't even know she'd been to Italy.'

'Oh yes! With an Italian lady, a friend of Mrs. Chanter's. She went a regular tour, and it was one circle of triumphs.'

'I believe you're half in fun, Marion.'

'I'm not indeed.'

'Well, I don't know what foreigners may think of her, but no one notices her much in this part of the world, as far as I can see.'

'Not demonstratively, because she's "fiancée," as she would call it, but she's much admired under the rose, more than you apparently imagine.'

'He's a strange kind of man, isn't he?'

'Who? Mr. Graeme?'

'Yes.'

'Strange?' she said quickly. 'How so?'

'I don't know,' I answered, regretting I had made the remark. 'I think there's something strange about him.'

'What sort of strangeness do you mean? Peculiarity of look—or manner?'

'I really scarcely know what I *do* mean,' I said, trying to appear indifferent, but conscious of a kind of restlessness and disturbance in my bearing which I saw my companion perceived. 'I don't know *exactly* what I mean, but I remember he impressed

me last night as being peculiar in some way or other, and I naturally wished to know if he had ever impressed you in the same manner.'

'I think *you* are peculiar,' she said, laughing. 'You say you notice a man is "strange," and when I ask in what way, you say you don't know what you mean, and look as confused and odd as possible.'

'Nonsense,' I answered. 'I'm not confused; but I am getting very warm and flushed, I know. I'll throw off this hot shawl. It can't be doing me any good.'

I let it slip from my shoulders, and then went on, with an easy indifference in my voice which astonished even myself.

'I can tell you what I mean,' I said, 'now I have thought a moment. I mean that it's unusual to find a man as young as Mr. Graeme apparently is, possessed of so much knowledge of the world as he evidently has, or so perfectly *nonchalant* and easy in his manners. He has the self-possession of a man twice his age.'

'You're quite right, he has. But there's nothing strange in that. He has travelled a great deal, mixing with people of all races and all varieties of disposition and manners; and that fact alone is sufficient to account for the self-possession of which you speak.'

'I didn't know he had even been out of England. In fact, I know nothing whatever about him.'

Something in the tone of my voice must have arrested her attention, for she looked at me for a moment with what seemed to me a surprised and scrutinising expression. 'The best thing for me to do now,' I said to myself, 'is to change the conversation.' A sudden recollection came over me at the right moment.

'Marion,' I said, breaking the pause which had ensued, 'I want to ask you something.'

'About Mr. Graeme, I suppose.'

'No, not about him. It's Mr. Harrop this time.'

'What about *him*, pray?'

'Do you remember one evening at the college, years ago, when I first went there, telling me what your opinion of him was?'

She reflected a moment.

'No, certainly not. I don't remember ever mentioning his name to you.'

'Try and think, Marion. Can't you recollect what you said of him?'

'I could not have said anything particular about him, even if his name was brought into any of our conversations. You must be mistaken altogether.'

'You don't remember telling me that you thought him a wicked and deceitful man?'

'Certainly not,' she answered, her face flushing, 'I never said any such thing. I never spoke a word against him in all my life.'

I was so astonished at the tone of her reply, and at her apparent denial of the possibility that she could ever have spoken disparagingly of him, that I sat looking fixedly at her, not knowing what to say next.

'I cannot understand it, Marion.'

'What cannot you understand?'

'How you have forgotten your old opinion of him, and your old dislike to him.'

'I never disliked him,' she said, 'I always thought the same of him. I always esteemed him an intelligent, upright, liberal, kind-hearted man; always, since I first knew him.'

'Is it possible that you can't recollect telling me that you despised him?'

'I never told you so, Mary; don't be silly.'

'I have remembered it so distinctly,' I urged; 'so much so, that the very first time I had cause to think him different from what your account of him had induced me to believe him to be, I was more surprised and puzzled than I think I have ever been at any other time of my life.'

'Not much more so, I fancy, than you have made me at present,' she said, laughing. 'Now I think of it, it is impossible that, while

at the College, I ever expressed any opinion at all of him, good or bad, either to you or anyone else; for I certainly never spoke to him, and, indeed, scarcely saw him till long after I had left school.'

'Never spoke to him at the College?' I stammered.

'No! never spoke to him at the College. If you remember, he did not make his appearance there till after his brother's death, and that did not happen till about the middle of the term, near the end of which I left. What time had I to judge him? I may have spoken, as you say I spoke, of Mr. John Harrop; for he, if I recollect rightly, was no favourite of mine; but I certainly never discussed Mr. Charles Harrop's peculiarities with you; for, as I said to you just now, I never spoke to him at the College, and, in fact, only remember seeing him there once, and that was on one "reception" night, when he apparently did not know I was Papa's

daughter, for he took no notice of me whatever.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, slowly, utterly mystified and bewildered. 'Were there two Mr. Harrops?'

She looked steadily at me for a moment, then laughed her old gay, merry laugh.

'It's hard to believe,' she said. 'But, if true, I see it all plainly.'

'What is hard to believe?'

'Never mind what. Just answer me. Do—you—mean—to—say—you took the two of them for one man? Why, it's like the twins in Shakspeare!'

'Two of them for one man,' I repeated. 'Oh! my goodness. You must be joking, Marion!'

'I should think that *you* were, but for your serious countenance. Now be quiet,' she went on, seeing I was about to speak. 'I know what you're going to say; your face has said it first, and I'll answer it—listen. Mr. John Harrop, twin brother to Mr.

Charles Harrop, as similar to him personally, as dissimilar in mind and disposition, was the founder, and, in the first instance, of course the owner, of Victoria College. At his death, which took place during a vacation, and, I believe, suddenly and most unexpectedly, his brother, Mr. Charles Harrop, who had just arrived in England from a foreign tour, succeeded to all his property, and took his place as head and director of the College. (I was told this by Papa in one of his letters just after it occurred.) Doubtless, Mr. Charles made his appearance at that Temple of Learning like the shadow of Mr. John; and, doubtless, though I never suspected it till now—(indeed, I took such little interest in the matter at the time, that beyond feeling a momentary sorrow for the untimely death of my father's friend, I don't think I thought of it at all)—Miss Grimshaw passed him off to the ignorant as the "real article," as Mr. Graeme would say. Do you understand?'

I understood it all. The sudden mystery of the alteration, as I had esteemed it, in his conduct towards myself—the day on which he had, in fact, seen me for the first time; the other mystery of his supposed change towards Miss Grimshaw, whom, I imagined, he had at one time upheld and respected; and a dozen other mysteries, hitherto apparently inexplicable, were mysteries no longer. The man who, by his hard, rough manner, had filled my childish heart with dread and fear, stood in the background, a distinct and separate being from the one who had warned me in kind accents of the danger and evils besetting my path; who had acted towards me as though I were his own child, and whom I—alas for my weakness!—still loved with a love that knew no hope. I glanced at Marion—she was watching intently every change in my face, with a curious expression on her own, half doubt, half pity.

'You don't seem surprised, Mary.'

'I am not so,' I said calmly. 'It seems

to me, in some strange way, that that which you have told me I have always known. I am not surprised in the least. How could I dream he was the same man? And yet, again, how could I explain for myself what you have now explained to me? What is the use of talking? It is as if I had known the truth all along, and only waited for some one to show me how it was the truth.'

She made no answer, only still looked at me with that same curious look—half doubt, half pity.

'How *could* he be the same?' I went on. 'How could he, whose very voice half frightened me, be the man whose whole heart is generosity and truth; whose whole thoughts are for others, not himself; whose sole wish seems to be to do good to those who need and suffer?'

Still the same look upon her face, but not a word or movement.

'Oh, Marion! I knew that some day it would be explained—that the time would

surely come when it would be made clear to me.'

She still looked at me, with the same doubt and tender pity on her face, but neither moved nor spoke.

'You do not seem glad with me, Marion.'

'I am glad that you are glad,' she said, turning her gaze from me with a quick sigh; 'but beyond that I have nothing to rejoice at —except that your friend's supposed faults are now proved to your satisfaction never to have belonged to him at all. I have not, like yourself, at any time confused him with his brother. You must remember that.'

'But cannot you understand how relieved I am?—the pleasure it is to me to understand it all clearly?'

'Yes. In your case I should doubtless feel as—as you do. Though probably the—the—well, we'll say the disease, would be in a milder form.'

'It has made me so happy,' I said. 'I can scarcely express how pleased I am.'

'You look pleased,' she answered, laughing. 'I wonder if Mr. Graeme would know again the pale face he bathed this afternoon. Examine it now, Mary.'

As she spoke she rose, and drew me towards a mirror at the other side of the room. I saw at once how flushed and excited I was. Trying to hide my confusion, I broke away from her, and went back to my seat on the couch.

'But I really *am* glad, Marion. It's of no use to attempt to disguise it.'

'I quite agree with you,' she answered quietly. 'But there seems to me to be no cause for such particular demonstration. Our old friend Dr. Long would say your nerves are in a bad state. You seem subject to fits both of depression and, if I may so express it, of exultation, with apparently very slight cause for either.'

She spoke so lightly and cheerfully that I congratulated myself on having succeeded in erasing from her mind any dim suspicion she

might have felt, a few minutes previously, of my weakness and silliness—so I called it in my calmer moments.

Ah! my dear lost friend! I little knew myself. And you I knew less still.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Before we could resume our chat, a servant entered with my renovated dress, which reminded Marion that she had to make her own toilette. We therefore commenced business simultaneously, and were soon engaged in an animated discussion on the comparative merits of muslin, silk, velvet, and a few of the other trifles which have power at most times to entrance a woman's mind.

When this important affair of dressing was completed, we descended to the drawing-room, where, to my friend's dismay, conveyed to me by a comical expression in her eyes, we found most of the guests of the evening already assembled. Mrs. Chanter, well dressed and conspicuous, as usual, was seated, also as usual, in an easy chair. Her beautiful

hair was arranged in the most modern style, and her teeth and complexion seemed more than ordinarily brilliant. By her side sat her eldest daughter, with her pretty French expression fitted on her like a mask. Mr. Graeme, who just honoured me with a quick glance as I entered the room, was talking to the latter. Mr. Harrop was conversing with a group of ladies in the distance, while another gentleman, whom I concluded to be Marion's father, was devoting himself to the entertainment of the guests generally, evidently bent on performing, as far as lay in his power, the duties of his missing daughter.

'Marion,' he said, as we entered the room, 'you are very negligent—you should have been here before.'

'Yes, I know, papa. I am very sorry. Did you like your walk? Are you well this evening?'

'I'm very well,' he said, motioning her away with his hand. 'Speak to Mrs. Chanter, my dear. You are very negligent.'

As she went round the room, gracefully welcoming her guests, her father came towards me, and held out his hand.

'We need not wait for an introduction,' he said. 'You are doubtless my daughter's friend, of whom she has spoken to me, and, as such, ever welcome here.' He placed a chair for me, and taking a seat by my side, began conversing with me. I replied in monosyllables, and soon, to my great relief, he left me to devote his attention to some one else. Then I relapsed into thought, foolishly turning over in my mind the various events of the day, and increasing my depression and restlessness by so doing.

At the commencement of this evening (I laugh sometimes now when I think of it all, though I was in no mood for laughing at the moment)—at the commencement of this evening, I made up my mind to devote my time to the endeavour to answer to myself two questions. The one was, whether Mr. Harrop loved Marion? the other, whether

Mr. Graeme ever evinced in society any symptoms of insanity? Acting upon this resolution I watched the latter gentleman almost the whole of the night as a cat does a mouse, and the more intently I watched, the more surely was I compelled to acknowledge to myself, that I had never in my life seen a man act less like a madman than he did.

With regard to Mr. Harrop, my attention was so concentrated on his friend that I had little to spare for him; but I managed to notice that, far from seeking Marion's society, he absolutely appeared to avoid it, talking to anyone but herself, and was, to all outward seeming, so charmed with his sister's attractions, and Mr. Launceston's conversation, that he did not care for any other entertainment. And yet I tortured myself about him. 'He has some reason,' I said to myself, 'for endeavouring to conceal for the present the affection he feels for her.' I recollected the look I had seen on his face that afternoon, when she had given the flower to Mr. Graeme,

and then I said to myself, 'She hurt him by doing so, and this apparent indifference on his part is only assumed to show his displeasure.' Each fresh thought brought fresh misery, and before the evening was half over I felt too sick at heart to care for anything.

At length my business was interrupted. I saw Mr. Graeme crossing the room quickly towards me. I had imagined myself unnoticed, in my little corner, by anybody, but as he came nearer to me, and at length took a seat by my side, I saw by the expression of his face that he at least had been observing me, and probably as closely in his way as I had been watching him in mine.

'Why do you sit here, all by yourself, Miss Browne? Has your friend, Miss Launceston, forgotten you?'

He spoke loudly enough to be heard by Marion, which was doubtless what he intended. She was standing a short distance off, selecting a song for him to sing.

'Her friend Miss Launceston has not forgotten her,' she said, turning round and coming nearer to us with a piece of music in her hand; 'but she thought that Miss Browne, not being quite well and strong this evening, had better please herself, and, as she seemed to prefer doing so, remain quiet.'

'But she's so *dreadfully* quiet,' he urged, 'so *oppressively* quiet, it's so suggestive of secret sorrow, or agonising remorse, or something equally tragic. You've nothing on your mind, have you, Miss Browne?'

A peculiar expression on his face, lost instantly in his usual gay look, half frightened me for a moment.

'Am I so very quiet?' I answered, speaking as indifferently and unconcernedly as I could. 'I did not know I was so; but now I think of it, I certainly have not been talking much. As Miss Launceston says, I am not very well nor very strong, and perhaps that makes me disinclined to join in noisy amusements.' I had no sooner uttered the last two

words than I perceived how *brusque* and rude they were.

'Noisy amusements!' he exclaimed, laughing. 'What a compliment! I suppose what we are pleased to call "music" and "singing" constitute the noise?'

'I beg your pardon,' I said, my face flushing. 'I mean "noisy" in comparison with my, at present, quieter method of enjoyment.'

'Enjoyment? Do you call it enjoyment? I must say it doesn't seem like anything of the kind to me. It seems to me more like penance. Now do come and accompany me in a song. It is one of Miss Launceston's choosing. Take my arm, and let me lead you to the piano.'

'Miss Harrop usually plays your accompaniments, does she not?'

'When she knows them,' he answered, laughing; 'but this is something new, so I won't trust her. Come, be kind for once, Miss Browne.'

Mr. Harrop looking towards us, and his

niece advancing to hear what we were saying, with a cloud on her pretty face, decided me. I rose, and though trembling with agitation, took the arm of my tormentor and walked with an indifferent air to the piano. The song was played, and sung, and admired, and returned thanks for ; and, learning wisdom, on vacating my position as accompanyist I did not again attempt to isolate myself. The evening went on as cheerfully as ever, and as I joined in the amusements, no farther remark was made by Mr. Graeme on the way I was pleased to conduct myself. But still I kept watch.

By the time supper was announced I had become, outwardly, one of the gayest in the room, and, accepting the escort of a weak-eyed young man, who for some considerable time had been following me about with a kind of mild admiration in his face, I made my appearance in the dining-room just after Marion and Mr. Harrop, both of whom greeted me as I entered with remarks on my

improved looks. During the meal my weak-eyed companion kept up a continuous chatter, which I answered in monosyllables; for, Mr. Graeme being seated opposite to me, my cat-like watching of him became so absorbing that I did not hear half the inane remarks that were pouring into my ears. When my interesting occupation was at its height I became conscious that Mr. Harrop was addressing me. My disregarded companion had to acquaint me with the fact. If he or some one else had not done so, I know not when I should have become cognisant of it, so intently was my mind fixed on its one idea.

'Miss Browne, excuse me, but do you hear what Miss Launceston is saying of you?'

'No,' I said laughingly; 'how should I be likely to hear when she was not addressing me, and I was listening to some one else?'

'Oh, Mr. Harrop, this is not fair.'

'What is not fair, Miss Launceston?'

'Repeating what I said.'

'I beg your pardon, I think differently,' he replied, smiling. 'I want to know if you have been speaking the truth.'

She coloured scarlet. 'I never say what is untrue, sir, even in jest.'

'Pray let me hear what it is,' I said; 'not to verify Marion's words, for I am sure they must be correct, but——'

'But what?'

'But to know what it can be that you will not believe of me.'

'I should be sorry to believe anything bad of you, hence my incredulity on the present occasion. Miss Launceston tells me that your nature is very different from what an ordinary observer—Mr. Graeme, for instance, we will say, as he seems to be listening to our conversation, and interesting himself in us—judging from your usual demeanour, would take it to be.'

'Indeed. How so?'

'Just as lightning is occasionally concealed in bright summer clouds, &c., &c.

Do you comprehend? Something about a raging demon and a quiet exterior——'

'I beg your pardon,' Marion interrupted, 'I did not make use of such words. I said that you were mistaken if you judged Mary to be naturally of a quiet unimpulsive temperament. I told you that, on the contrary, she is demonstrative, impressionable, and impulsive.'

'And also—Miss Launceston——'

'And also,' she continued proudly, 'and also what is commonly called passionate and headstrong.'

'Exactly so. Those were the words. Do you plead guilty, prisoner at the bar?'

'Certainly. By nature I know I am anything but amiable, being both hasty and wilful.'

'You are giving yourself a bad character, Miss Browne,' said Mr. Graeme, breaking into the conversation at this juncture. He had been listening intently hitherto to all we had been saying. 'You are giving yourself

a bad, and I believe a false character. You are too timid and yielding to be wilful, I am sure.'

'You are quite mistaken,' I exclaimed hastily; 'I am neither yielding nor timid.'

'I beg your pardon. I hoped you were both. Like a gentle voice, a mild disposition is an "excellent thing in woman." You must excuse me again when I say that, in spite of your words, I still hold to the opinion I have expressed.'

'Not a very polite speech, my friend,' said Mr. Harrop.

'*I* consider it *very* polite,' he replied. 'A young lady states in my presence that she is wilful and passionate, and all manner of dreadful things, and I candidly tell her that my reason refuses to credit such assertions. Would it be the right thing to say, "No doubt you speak truth," and insinuate that she was probably even worse than her confession implied? Do you believe she is passionate and obstinate and—and—so on?'

'I believe that she believes it.'

'Ah! I may believe that; but that's not the question under discussion.'

It certainly was not. And Mr. Graeme, rejoicing in his temporary victory, showed signs of quitting the field triumphant.

'Stop a moment,' said Mr. Harrop. 'How do you define the word "passionate"?'

His opponent shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating look. 'You'd better ask Miss Browne.'

'Define it?' I said. 'Well, I suppose a passionate person is one who is in the habit of feeling and displaying an amount of excitement disproportionate to the cause which elicits it.'

'Very good; we'll accept that. But according to such a definition, a person under the influence of such excitement is, for the time, insane. Is that right, Willie?'

'Excuse me, I've nothing to do with it. It's Miss Browne to answer.'

'Come, Miss Browne, the audience waits.'

'I cannot give an opinion,' I said. 'You are getting beyond me.'

'Some one else must do it, then. Come, Willie, don't show the white feather. What do you say?'

'I say you're wrong, then. A man in a passion, and an insane man, are two distinct and different beings.'

'I can't see it.'

'I can. But I'm not going to argue. I never do argue. Come to me in ten years' time and perhaps I shall be a match for you. At present I'm too young to waste even a minute on such a dry amusement. I know one thing, and that is, that when I've made up my mind thoroughly to do a thing, whether at the moment of my resolution I am or am not in a passion, I invariably do it, and give the consequences to the winds.'

'Then your fits of passion, or madness, or whatever you please to call them, are occasionally dangerous ones.'

'Occasionally—to the individual who has the misfortune to cause them.'

He laughed as he spoke, but it was a disagreeable, harsh laugh, and sounded anything but pleasant.

'How dreadful it is to hear people talk about mad people, and murders, and passions, and all that sort of thing. Do please be quiet, Willie.'

It was Fanny Harrop who spoke. She was seated by the side of Mr. Graeme, though I had not noticed her before, since we had entered the dining-room.

'I'm quite willing to drop the subject, and more than willing if you wish it.'

'I do wish it, then. Talk about something more pleasant, please.'

'It is a baw—isn't it, Miss Browne, to hear a fellah talk about mad fellahs, and such unpleasant things? It makes a fellah who doesn't like to hear about such fellahs very uncomfortable—doesn't it, Miss Browne?'

This from my weak friend at my left. I said, 'I supposed it did,' and the conversation drifted off to other subjects, and the supper drew to a close, and the visitors began returning to the drawing-room. My companion, who had brightened up considerably under the influence of several glasses of wine, asked me if I would stay a few moments in the dining-room and inspect the pictures with him. As others were grouping about the room examining them, I did not like to be so unamiable as to refuse his request. Our inspection lasted about ten minutes, and was well worth the time devoted to it; but grudging even the shortest absence from the society of two or three of those who had already left the room, it was with a feeling of relief that I found it was over, and I was at liberty to return to the drawing-room.

Our entrance into that apartment with several others was apparently unnoticed by a small group of people standing inside, near

the door. It consisted of Fanny Harrop, her uncle, and Mr. Graeme. As I entered, taking up a position not far from the speakers, I distinctly heard the following fragments of conversation :

'Well, I assure you, that not only this afternoon, but also at supper when you were not noticing her, her look and manner were most marked and peculiar; indeed so much so that Fanny drew my attention to her.' The speaker was Mr. Graeme.

'I didn't draw your attention to her, Willie. You are quite mistaken.'

'I beg your pardon; you remarked how very quiet and singular she was.'

'Yes; but you asked me first whether——'

'I beg your pardon, Fanny.'

'Well, perhaps you didn't; but, in any case, I don't think her more peculiar than usual. She's always odd, and always was, at least what I remember of her. Why, only this morning when I was speaking to her in the schoolroom about nothing at

all, she suddenly turned as white as death, and looked so dreadful that I was quite frightened, or, at least I should have been so, if I were in the habit of allowing myself to be frightened at trifles, which I'm not. When I asked her what was the matter, and what made her look so pale, she said nothing was the matter, and no doubt she looked white because she was sitting in a strong light, or something of the sort. Now, who ever heard of a person being turned to a death-like hue by simply sitting in a strong light? I never knew anything so ridiculous in my life. She's a very peculiar person, and very passionate and bad-tempered into the bargain, though uncle doesn't believe it.'

'I know her to be hasty and passionate, Fanny; but I should not think she was bad-tempered,' said Mr. Harrop.

'You know her to be hasty and passionate!' she exclaimed, turning suddenly towards the speaker: 'then why did you

tell Marion that you couldn't believe she was either ?'

'My dear child, I said nothing of the kind. Try to be more exact. I knew our friend Miss Launceston was perfectly right in her remarks; and, if you must know the truth, I was simply fencing with her, in order to hear her talk.'

'What a confession, uncle! I couldn't have believed it of you!'

'I'm very bad, sometimes, I know,' he replied. 'I get led away by the vile impulse of the moment, and blush afterwards when I reflect upon the guilty deeds I have committed. With regard to Miss Browne, Fanny,' he went on, 'I think, whatever may be the monstrosities of her disposition, she looks very pale and ill, poor girl. I wish, if it is only to oblige me, you would——'

At this juncture Marion made her appearance suddenly before me, emerging from some hidden corner, and taking me by the arm led me out of hearing of my three

acquaintances, none of whom appeared to see either myself or my friend.

As I went with her across the room, a vague idea as to the object Mr. Graeme had in view crossed my mind, but I resolutely put aside for the time all reflection upon the subject, and devoted myself for the remainder of the evening to laughing and chatting with anyone who came near me; carrying on quite a flirtation with my weak friend, and otherwise acting in a manner as unlike as possible to that which had elicited Mr. Graeme's remarks. I knew, whatever might have been his motive in making them, my best plan was to undo, as far as possible, any impression they might have made on his listeners. At length it was time to go home, and Marion went with me into her room, and waited for me to put on my hat and cloak.

'I have only a minute to stay,' she said, taking both my hands in hers when I had hurriedly dressed in silence. 'I have only

a minute to stay, Mary—the people downstairs will be wanting me. But tell me, dear, before you go, what is the matter with you. I know there is something wrong with you. Are you ill?'

'No!' I said, wearily. 'I am not ill at all.'

'I am sure you are not well,' she went on, looking at me earnestly. 'You are weak and trembling. You are not fit to go home to-night. I could see through all your forced gaiety. You had better stay with me. I will go and tell Mrs. Chanter you will remain here till to-morrow.'

'Oh, Marion! do not,' I pleaded.

'And why not?'

'I can't bear being under obligations to people; and, besides, I would rather go home.'

'Very well,' she said, after a moment's pause; 'you shall do as you like—you proud, wilful girl. Now kiss me.' She put her arms round my neck.

'Good-bye, Marion.'

'Good-bye, poor, pale, little creature. In a day or two, "I am again at 'The Laurels,'" as our friend Fanny would say, and shall bring you away by force. Not fifty Mrs. Chanters should stop me. No! not even if every one of the fifty had as many children to be taught as the one in question, and you were their only governess. I'll look at her and frighten her. Do you know that she professes to be frightened when I look at her?'

'No!' I said, laughing.

'Quite true; I assure you. She told Mr. Graeme so; and, in some way, it came round to me. Now, for your sake, I'll try the effect of a good, long, steady stare at her on my appearance at "The Laurels."' She kissed me again. 'There; I want you to go away laughing. Here, take this paper of Mr. Graeme's, as an earnest that I will pay you an early visit. See if you can find his article. I must read it soon, you know,

or he will be vexed; so I shall have to come after it.'

She slipped the paper into my hand.

'I don't wish for it,' I said, trying to force it back upon her. But just at this moment a summons came. She was wanted downstairs immediately. Hastily thrusting the object of dispute into my pocket, and holding up her finger warningly, she slipped her arm quickly through mine, and in a moment we were both hurrying together towards the drawing-room.

As we descended the stairs, I saw that many of the visitors were already preparing for departure. The hall-door was open. Marion hastened to it. There was a carriage at the foot of the steps, which I at once recognised as Mrs. Chanter's—in fact, she and her daughter were already seated in it. Mr. Harrop was standing near. When he caught sight of Marion and myself, he hurried to the side of the carriage and said a few words to his niece in a low tone. As he did

so, Mr. Graeme advanced along the hall, with his hat in his hand.

'Now, are we all ready?' he said.

'Quite so,' said Mr. Harrop, turning quickly towards him; 'you are to accompany these ladies, please, or rather you are to accompany the coachman, while, thanks to the smallness of the vehicle, I am to have the pleasure of walking home with Miss Browne.'

A look of anger crossed Mr. Graeme's face, though no one but myself appeared to observe it.

'That's rather hard upon Miss Browne,' he said, 'when she's so weak and ill. Perhaps, Fanny, you would like to accept the escort of your uncle and myself, and give up your seat to her.'

'I shouldn't like it at all,' said that young lady in her pretty pettish way. 'Miss Browne isn't ill. If she is, the walk will do her good, I should think.'

Mr. Harrop looked annoyed.

'I took the liberty of suggesting this plan

before you came upon the scene, Mr. Graeme. You should have given me credit for it.'

Probably he had done so, but, for some reason which I could only blindly guess at, he was evidently determined that I should not walk home alone with Mr. Harrop.

'Well; if it can't be altered,' he said, 'I think I'll be of the walking party.'

'In which case,' said Mrs. Chanter, appearing like a stout ghost from the interior of the carriage, 'my brother must be of the driving party. It is not my wish to return home unattended.'

This was decisive. Before I had time to feel anything but surprise at this speech, Mr. Graeme had bowed gravely to the speaker, and mounted the box by the side of the coachman. No doubt it did not take him long to conclude that it would be wisest, in any case, not to offend Miss Harrop by deserting her for a moonlight walk alone with another young lady; and, more than all, it would be most unwise to offend Mrs. Chanter.

With a few hurried adieux, the occupants of the carriage started on their journey; and with a last good-bye to Marion and her father, Mr. Harrop and myself commenced our walk.

It was a calm, starry night. After a few remarks on its beauty and serenity, my companion lapsed into silence, and I walked on by his side as voiceless as himself. It was not till we were within sight of 'The Laurels' that he spoke again.

'Miss Browne,' he said, suddenly, 'I am afraid you find me a very dull escort.'

'Not at all,' I answered; 'I have been so occupied with my own thoughts that I hardly noticed you were absorbed in yours.'

'Well, at all events, if you will excuse the past so far as to listen to me, I want now to speak to you.'

He paused, as if expecting me to say something.

'Yes,' I said; 'of course I'll listen.'

'Well, do you remember that on the

day you stumbled upon me, on your first morning at "The Laurels," you promised me that if, during your residence with my sister, you needed advice or assistance you would come to me?'

'Yes; I remember it distinctly.'

'I wish then to ask you one question. Have you forfeited your word?'

'Oh! no, indeed,' I said, almost without hesitation. 'Why should you think I have done so?' My dread of further questioning gave force to my speech and manner. Alas for me! He took it to be the force of truth.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, looking at me intently; 'but you seemed ill and unhappy to-day, and none of us like to see you so. I thought I might be perhaps able to help you in some way, if I knew what troubled you.'

'Indeed, you cannot help me in anything,' I said, firmly. 'Do you think, if you could, that I should so soon forget the goodness that drew from me the promise I gave you?'

'No,' he said, kindly, but gravely. 'I did not imagine you would wilfully break your word; but I feared there was cause for redeeming it, and possibly through timidity or misjudgment you had not as yet done so. You have a sure friend in Miss Launceston, have you not?'

'Yes,' I said; 'a sure and steadfast friend.'

'Then confide in her at all times. You cannot do better. A woman is, for another woman, in most instances, a better adviser than a man can be; and the friend of such a woman as Miss Launceston is indeed favoured.'

'Is indeed favoured,' I repeated, bitterly.

'Not that I abjure my trust,' he went on, in a less serious tone. 'You must not think that for a moment.'

'No,' I said; 'I don't think it. You are too kind to do so. I shall never forget how good you have always been to me.'

He laughed pleasantly.

'You are like all women,' he said, 'in

expressing such inordinate gratitude for what is merely worth a common "thank you." You would not find me so extremely sensitive if I were promised the chance of a good turn from you.'

We were at the gate now. Walking up the garden we met Mr. Graeme, smoking. One sharp, quick glance at both of us.

'I'm having a pipe, you see,' he said, looking full at my companion; 'will you join me?'

'I don't mind if I do—presently.'

'Pray stay now,' I said; 'I can get in by myself, you know. There is sure to be a servant up for Mrs. Chanter. You can go round into the grounds and have a quiet saunter with Mr. Graeme.'

'But what am I to smoke? Won't you allow me to get my pet pipe? I always have it at night, and no other.'

'Oh,' I said; 'I didn't understand. I only thought it a pity to trouble yourself and your latch-key needlessly.'

He took me safely into the hall, Mr. Graeme following us.

'Now,' he said, 'good-night. Get well and strong as soon as you can.'

'I am quite well now, and quite strong.'

He laughed and shook his head; then, with another 'good-night' from him, and a bow from Mr. Graeme, which I returned without meeting his look, I went on my way.

Arrived in my own room, I turned the gas full on, looked in the glass wonderingly at my pale face, and thought of the proud beauty of Marion. 'It is an honour to have such a woman for a friend,' I said aloud—'it is an honour to have such a woman for a friend.'

Then I sat down with my hat and cloak on, and mechanically took from my pocket the paper this friend had placed there.

Wondering vaguely for the moment what it could be—for the fact that I had it had quite slipped from my mind—I turned it over and placed it on the dressing-table before me,

with the last sheet uppermost. As I did so my eye fell upon a list of deaths, of which the first ran as follows :—

'April 7, at Sydney, Australia, accidentally drowned by the upsetting of a pleasure-boat, Louis Ernest, only son of the late L. E. Browne, Esq., of Eastbury, Wiltshire.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STRANGE as it may seem, though at first stunned by the blow, upon waking again to the full realisation of the words, I did not immediately experience either sorrow or surprise.

'This is the man,' I said to myself, 'who wilfully left his mother and sister to struggle unaided through the bitterness of poverty and grief. God has punished him!'

I sat motionless and tearless for many minutes. Suddenly, as though an angel had come from heaven to touch my heart, some long-forgotten scene of childhood rushed upon my mind with startling vividness. I saw my brother nestling to his mother's side for protection from some fancied danger. I saw her look of love, I heard her soothing,

encouraging words. I began to wonder then what expression his face had worn when it had disappeared in the cruel waters. I recollected once hearing my father say that a companion of his youth was drowned. He himself was near at hand, but unable to assist him. 'He starts and cries out in his sleep,' my mother would say, 'when he dreams of his friend's despairing look as he sank to rise no more.' Had my brother's face worn such a look? Had it been as awful in its agony? Or had the timid childish expression come back into it which I had seen it wear on that night which I had suddenly recollected with such vividness, when he clung in boyish terror to his mother? Had he in any past time repented for one moment? . . . Oh God!' I cried aloud, 'I cannot bear it. It is killing me. . . .'

The blinding tears came at last, and I wept long and bitterly. The grey light of morning came stealing into the room, and still my grief was unabated. I knew not till

then how closely and despairingly, in the loss of all other natural ties, my heart had clung to the only one as yet not utterly and irremediably broken.

The noisy voices of the waking children in the room near at length aroused me. I rose from the bed, on which I had thrown myself some hours before without removing my clothes, bathed my eyes, and changed my dress for that which I always wore in the morning. Then, after carefully folding and locking up the paper with its dreadful words, I went quietly into the schoolroom as if nothing had happened. As the day went on my mind gradually became again sensible of the anxiety which had weighed upon it previous to my knowledge of my brother's death, and the impression made by the sudden shock I had received grew by degrees less and less.

Nearly a week went by, but Marion did not redeem her promise of fixing her eyes on Mrs. Chanter, and carrying me away in

triumph. The usual routine went on. I lived my life of solitude. The morning after our evening at Mr. Launceston's Mr. Harrop had sent up to know if I felt better than on the previous night (to which I had returned answer that I was perfectly recovered), but beyond this, for as much as I saw or heard of any of the people who had taken part in the amusements of that—to me memorable —evening, they might just as well have ceased to exist.

One thing, however, came to my knowledge before many days more had passed, and that was that Fanny Harrop was soon to be married. I heard this from Aura and Nellie, who were to have the honour of being bridesmaids, though the increasing bustle in the house had of itself told me that something unusual was going to happen. Two or three times when my little pupils and myself were out for our daily walk, we met Mrs. Chanter and her daughter driving in the large open carriage, accompanied by Mr.

Graeme, and on one occasion by Mr. Harrop also. The latter gentleman raised his hat when he saw me, and his friend, following the direction of his eyes, did the same; and as he looked at me, I saw unmistakably on his face an expression of triumph. What could it mean? I began to strengthen myself in my old idea that he was out of his senses.

One afternoon, soon after this meeting, we encountered Mr. Harrop alone, walking. The little ones, who had been unusually silent since we had left the house, were the first to catch sight of him, and forsaking me in a moment, ran towards him.

'There, uncle,' I heard one of them call out, 'we were determined to do it.'

'Do what?'

'Why, we were determined to meet you. We wanted to so much, and we knew you'd gone up this way because nurse saw you; and we guessed you'd come back the same road, because the fields are muddy; and we

coaxed Miss Browne to turn this way without telling her why, or she wouldn't have done it. And, here we are.'

'Well,' he said, 'and what do you want?'

'Want? why, nothing but to see you, you dear kind Uncle Charles.'

'But you see me continually, you silly children.'

'Yes, at home; but we don't pounce upon you in the road like this, and frighten you out of your wits.'

'My goodness!' he said, 'I'm not frightened! Don't flatter yourselves, young ladies. Now, if you'd risen gradually out of the ground before my astonished eyes, instead of leisurely walking on the queen's highway, as I saw you doing long before you appeared to see me, I might have felt alarmed. How do you do, Miss Browne?' As he spoke he shook hands with me kindly. 'I thought you took your walks abroad in the morning. Have these wedding people driven

you to alter your arrangements?' he asked, lifting his eyebrows comically.

'Oh, no! The "wedding people," as you call them, never interfere with us. I, for one, never see them, except occasionally out of doors.'

'*I* do,' he said. 'I see more of them than I care for, only I fear it's high treason to say so. They've chased me from house and home. My sister is possessed just now with such a mania for the examination of silks, satins, ribbons, and all manner of things in which men take no interest, and she so often summons me to try and extract some opinion from me as to the several merits of the various fabrics she presents to my notice, that I am frequently very glad to avail myself of my position of bachelor-uncle, and rush off and console myself in this style.'

He held out a cigar which he had in his hand, and which he had left off smoking as he approached us.

'It's horrid, Uncle Charles, isn't it? We never have any fun at all now. We never even see Fanny, to speak to, I mean; and mamma looks so dreadfully cross when it's our time to be downstairs, that we're glad to get away again, aren't we, Nellie?' This from Miss Aura, pouting.

'You're quite right, Aura,' answered her uncle, speaking in as grave and earnest a tone as he would have used to a woman. 'You're quite right. We're all badly treated. No one has any comfort except these people who are going to be married. I mean to make up for it, though, when Miss Launceston comes back. We'll get up a picnic or something in that line, and we'll all go—Miss Launceston, and Miss Browne, and all of us—and we'll leave all these people at home to groan, and grumble, and envy us. We'd better be quick about it, though, for it's only nine—no, ten days to the wedding.'

(Marion was away then, and she had never let me know!)

'Do you really mean it, uncle? What a good old fellow you are!'

'That's as it may be,' he answered. 'But at all events, Aura, if your words are true, there's all the less reason for me to be ill-treated and imposed upon, as I certainly am, and no mistake. So is Miss Browne too, if she only knew it. And she shall know it too. Do you see this, Miss Browne?' He took a letter from his pocket as he spoke, and held it up before us.

'What is it, uncle?'

'Mind your own affairs, Miss Nellie. I am not speaking to you. Do you notice the address, Miss Browne?'

'Yes; it is addressed to myself.'

'Exactly. Do you recognise the hand-writing?'

'Yes. It's Miss Launceston's.'

'You are right. It's your property, of which these wedding people have defrauded you for days. Pray possess yourself of it, and read it at once. It's quite time you did

so.' He placed it in my hand as he spoke, and, nothing loth, I obeyed orders by opening it immediately.

'Dear Mary,—I am obliged to leave home for a few days, so Mrs. Chanter will be spared the threatened infliction. I will see you as soon after my return as possible. Try and keep safely till we meet again, both yourself and Mr. Graeme's paper. The latter I hope you have read or soon will read, as I shall want it on my return.

'Your sincere friend,

'MARION.'

This note was dated a week previously, and upon putting it back into the envelope I saw that the latter was much soiled.

'Well, Miss Browne, I hope you are more satisfied with your treatment than I am with mine.'

'I wish I had received the letter sooner,' I answered. 'Marion had promised to come and see me at "The Laurels," and I have

been wondering at her silence and non-appearance.'

'I rescued that document,' he went on, 'just before I came out, from a heap of dessert plates and crockery of all kinds, where it had evidently spent a few days in peaceful solitude, unnoticed, and probably unobserved by mankind. Instead of putting an end to the evil at once, and sending it to you direct, in my righteous indignation I put it in my pocket and walked off with it, intending, on my return home, to bring it to your domain with my own hands, thinking that by that time my anger might be sufficiently cooled down to permit me to make a lucid explanation of the circumstances which had led to my possession of it. I trust you'll forgive me,' he added with mock gravity.

'There's nothing to forgive,' I answered, laughing. 'I'm only so much obliged to you for getting it for me at all.'

'Thank you. I wish all my offences in

other quarters could obtain absolution as easily.'

'If they are not greater than this one, they cannot need absolution at all. Are you aware,' I added, 'when Miss Launceston purposes returning home?'

'She is expected, I believe, the day after to-morrow.'

How does he know this? I said to myself. Does she write to him?

The thought that he might have heard the proposed length of her absence mentioned in general conversation, which, no doubt, had been the mainspring of my question, had left my mind entirely, and given place to this new idea.

'I shall be glad when she comes,' I said.

'I shall be more than glad,' he replied, coolly. 'I only wish she was up at "The Laurels" now to put them all in order. She's inestimable in the art of keeping people and things in their right place, and my sister wants assistance in that way just now.'

At this juncture Aura, no doubt wearied by the serious turn of the conversation, scampered off and seated herself on a large stone, a number of them being ranged along the road, close together. Nellie imitated her example, placing herself close to her sister, and, to my consternation, Mr. Harrop, after looking at the two, followed in their track, and sat down by the side of Nellie.

'Now, Miss Browne, are the seats too rude for you?'

'Not at all,' I said, advancing and placing myself, necessarily, at his side, as the stones commenced where Aura had perched herself. 'I like the country, and all its conveniences and inconveniences.'

'Uncle Charles,' said Nellie gravely, at this point, 'now we're seated, I'm going to talk. When you and Miss Launceston are married, do you mean to make as much fuss about it as Fanny and Mr. Graeme do?'

'That I don't know at all, Nellie. Per-

haps the fuss will be when I ask Miss Launceston about it. She *might* say, you know, that this wedding made such a commotion that it would be best not to try another. But what makes you think I mean to ask her about it?'

'I don't know, but I always thought you would some day. You see you're so good-looking and she's so good-looking, and you're both such good old fellows—I mean you're such a good old fellow, and she's such a good old—well, I don't know what I mean, but I think it would be just the thing, don't you?'

'Well,' he replied, 'I don't know but what it would.'

'I should see about it when she comes home, if I were you, and then get it over at once, and take the shine out of Fanny and Mr. Graeme. Now, will you promise, Uncle Charles?'

'Well, you see, I shouldn't like to bind myself down. I might think better of it after

I had committed myself, and then it would be awkward. I must take time to consider, I think.'

'But you'll let us know if you do decide upon it, won't you?'

'Oh certainly. I'll place every confidence in you. You and Aura shall be the first to be consulted if it's arranged. Miss Launceston and I will resolve ourselves into a deputation to the schoolroom, acquaint you with the happy news, and ask your talented opinion upon the best method of settling all preliminaries; that is, if Miss Browne gives permission for the invasion of her domain. What do you say, Miss Browne?'

'Certainly. It would be very rude of me to raise any objection.'

'So I think. But seriously, Nellie,' he went on, 'speaking most seriously, you know, —if it's possible to speak otherwise on such a subject—speaking in all seriousness, do you think I've got a chance?'

'A chance?' interrupted Aura, breaking

suddenly into the conversation to which she had been listening most attentively, 'What do you mean by "a chance"?'

'Well, a chance, Miss Aura, that's what I mean,' he replied, turning gravely to the little speaker. 'Do you think I've got a chance? An old fellow like me, you know. Do you think Miss Launceston would like to have such a commotion again, and have me in it?'

'Oh, uncle! The idea! I couldn't believe my ears. I thought you were making fun! Of course she would. Of course she'd be delighted. Wouldn't you be, Miss Browne? I know if I were Miss Launceston, I should like to marry such a nice man as you, you silly thing!'

'I'm glad you think so.'

'I don't think about it: I know it. I shall be so glad when the time comes, if it ever does come.'

'Why?'

'Oh! because there'll be such lots of

fun, and you'll let us sit up late, I know, for nights and nights before the wedding. You couldn't refuse. And Miss Launceston won't snap at us as Fanny does, because she's fond of children and likes to see them happy.'

'I think quite the same as Aura in every way,' said Miss Nellie at this juncture, and both the children crossed their hands in their laps, and looked highly satisfied.

'Well, that's a comfort, at all events,' said Mr. Harrop. 'And now suppose we leave contemplating the dim and distant future, and confer upon events which must speedily take place. What do you think of these present wedding arrangements?'

'Think of them, Uncle Charles? Why, we think everything's horrid. Do you know we're not even to sit up late the night of the party! Mamma says she won't have it, as it spoils our complexions.'

'And what did you say?'

'We didn't say anything, but we thought something. We were both too wise to *say* it.'

'And what did you think?'

'We thought,' said Miss Aura, sinking her voice into a whisper, and putting on a pretty little cunning look, 'we thought we'd ask *you* about it.'

'Very good. Wait till the time comes, and *then* ask me. I promise you I'll answer you at once.'

He screwed up his eyes as he spoke, and looked first at one of the children and then at the other, which process appeared to content them thoroughly, for they laughed in chorus.

'And now, young ladies, as you've expressed *your* opinions, it's now Miss Browne's turn to express hers. What do you think of this purposed marriage, Miss Browne?'

The question seemed so strange, and was so totally unexpected, that it was some moments before I could find words.

'What do I think of it?' I stammered.

'Yes. What do you think of it?'

'Think of it? In what way?'

'In all ways. In any way. What do you think of it generally?'

'I have no opinion,' I said. 'It seemed no concern of mine, and, therefore, I have not thought about it at all.'

'Not thought about it at all! Do you mean that?'

'Well, I've thought very little of it. It's such a strange question to ask me.'

'How strange?'

This time I had no answer.

'I suppose you mean that from the present speaker the question appears strange, while from another it might not appear so.'

'Yes, perhaps that's what I mean.'

'Well, to oblige me, forget the strangeness of it. Answer my question as though Fanny were not related to me, as though you were speaking to your most intimate friend—Miss Launceston, for instance. Aura, do you see those blue-bells on the hill there?'

'Yes, Uncle Charles.'

'Well, you and Nellie may go and gather as

many as you can find, and bring them to me.'

Both children darted off, apparently well-pleased with their commission.

'Now, Miss Browne,' he said, turning to me, 'may I once more ask you for your opinion on this subject?'

'Indeed, Mr. Harrop,' I began, deprecatingly——

'Well,' he interrupted, 'far be it from me even to wish to force you to speak. If you would rather be silent on the subject, do not let any desire of mine interfere with yours.'

I knew by the expression of his voice that his words were sincere; but, at the moment I would have said anything to please him.

'I don't mind speaking,' I said, 'or telling you what I think, but my thoughts on the subject have been so indistinct that I scarcely know what they have been, much less how to put them into words. I have thought that on the whole——'

'Yes,' he interrupted.

'I may say, I *think* that on the whole, if I had any interest in this marriage—which I have not——'

'Exactly so; any interest in this marriage, which you have not——'

'I think that I should rather——;' here I stopped.

'You would rather what?' he asked, quietly, but with what seemed to me an anxious expression of countenance.

'It perhaps will sound rude of me to say so, but I think I would rather it did not take place.'

'And why?' he exclaimed abruptly.

The blood rushed to my face. The sudden change in his manner, which I should probably not have observed in a man of less equable temperament than himself, filled me with confusion. I could make no answer. I sat motionless.

'Why so?' he asked again; but this time his voice and manner were more calm.

'For what reason, if you had any interest in this marriage, which of course you have not, for what reason would you rather that it should not take place?'

I seemed more mystified than ever. What could I say? I could not understand his motive in thus questioning me, but I felt very uneasy, and resolved now to endeavour to stop the conversation.

'I've said quite enough,' I answered, 'more, I think, than I ought to have said. Don't try and coax me to say any more,' I continued, laughing; but I saw, to my dismay, that he knew the laugh to be as forced and unnatural as it sounded to myself. 'Don't try to coax me to say any more. I am dumb! I must go. I must take the children home.'

'Stay,' he said, putting his hand on my arm as I attempted to rise. 'Stay one moment; I *must* speak to you. You have not said enough—you have said too much or too little, which is it?'

Utterly bewildered as I was, I could not resist, and sank down again submissively.

'Allowing you had any interest in this marriage,' he went on, 'would you prevent it were it in your power to do so?'

'Do not keep me here,' I said. 'I would really rather not say any more.' My only wish was to escape.

'My child,' he said—in the old gentle tone—alas! so well remembered by the listener, 'I will not keep you here against your will. It would be most unmanly of me to do so. Go when you please, but let me say this to you. If you know of any circumstance which—if you had any interest in this marriage—would induce you to stop it had you the power to do so—or which, made known to me, would induce me to exercise my right of stopping it, as guardian to my niece, now is your moment to speak, and I beseech and implore you to do so.'

What did he suspect? Was it what I had suspected, and still did suspect, or was it

something of which I had no suspicion at all? It seemed all so vague and unreal, and I had such a fear upon me—though of what I knew not—that I made up my mind to endeavour with one effort to satisfy my interrogator, and spare myself any further questioning.

'Mr. Harrop,' I said, so calmly, that I wondered afterwards at my own self-control, 'Mr. Harrop, you alarmed me by your manner, that is why I was anxious to get away. With regard to your question, how *can* I—how should I know anything which could prejudice the purposed marriage of your niece? I told you, half in jest and half in earnest, that had I any concern in it, I should not approve of it, and this for several reasons—the principal being that I think Miss Harrop and Mr. Graeme unsuited to each other, as the world calls it. Their natures do not seem to me compatible, if I may so express it, and therefore I think it is a pity they should have decided to spend their lives together. That was my chief reason for saying that

which appears to have disturbed you so much.'

He looked at me as I spoke as though he were weighing in a balance the probable truth or falsehood of every word I uttered—but I never changed countenance nor trembled, though he continued looking at me long after I had ceased to speak.

'I am satisfied,' he said at last, 'I am quite satisfied.' Then, with a sudden change of manner—'You must think I have behaved very strangely, Miss Browne.'

'Not at all,' I answered, conventionally. 'At least,' I added, after a moment's hesitation, 'when a sensible person acts in a manner which at the time strikes me as being singular, I know, upon reflection, that the chances are there is a good reason for any apparent inconsistency of conduct in such a person, although I may not be able even to guess at that reason, as in the present instance.'

'You are most flattering.'

'In what way?' I asked.

'And you have plenty of tact,' he went on, without heeding my question. 'It's a quality in which your sex excels, and in which you appear to excel your sex.'

'*That* is flattery, at all events,' I answered, laughing. 'But now, if you've quite finished your questions, I think it is time for me to be starting home. It must be near the tea hour.'

'Teatime! Ah, I suppose so, but the preparations for the wonderful coming event have quite put my teas and dinners out of my mind, and, apparently, I am as oblivious of those of other people. Yes, I've quite done my "questions" now, Miss Browne.'

He spoke of the wedding in the gay, bantering tone in which he had spoken of it to the children, and of the questions, as though they had been as idle and motiveless as the wind.

I rose to call the little ones, and he rose also. They were some distance off, still

busily collecting flowers. In rising I stooped forward to shake from my dress some blades of grass which I had been unconsciously picking and pulling to pieces. As I did so, I felt myself drawn almost violently back.

'Take care, you will be killed.'

A carriage, which I had not noticed before, went past us at a swift pace. In my momentary alarm I scarcely noticed the vehicle itself, and did not even glance at its occupants. Mr. Harrop looked after it till it had disappeared in a turn of the road, while I shook my dress thoroughly clear of the grass.

'Really, it's very cool,' he said, laughing. 'They torment people to death at home, and endanger their lives out of doors.'

'I don't understand.'

'Why, those people in the carriage. Did you not see them?'

'No, but I can guess who they were from what you say, of course.'

'And no doubt rightly. Viz., the bride

elect, the bridegroom elect, and, the most important, last—my sister.'

As I looked up at him I saw on his mouth the half-amused, half-sarcastic expression, which I so well remembered seeing on the poor dead face, once so like, and yet so unlike his own. The poor dead face, which now, for the sake of the living, I never thought of but with a feeling of pity and sorrow.

'They're not very careful, are they?'

'No, but I did not see them, and placed myself in their way. Thank you for taking charge of me so opportunely.'

'I expect I only saved you from the dust of their carriage wheels. They came at such a rapid pace, that perhaps I magnified the danger. But even too much dust is not pleasant.'

At this juncture he gave a sharp, quick whistle, and the children immediately turned and ran towards him, as though perfectly accustomed to being summoned after the manner of dogs.

'Excuse me, Miss Browne. It's not polite to whistle in the presence of ladies, but that's the only signal which my nieces understand as being imperative on my part.'

They came rushing up with their hands full of flowers.

'Here, Uncle. More than you expected, I guess. I've got the most.'

'Yes, Nellie, I see. Now, each of you give me the finest you can pick out, and then keep the rest yourselves.'

'Won't you have them all, Uncle Charles?'

'No, thank you, Aura.'

Both looked disappointed for a moment, but obeying orders each one selected the best she could find, and presented it to Mr. Harrop, who placed it in his button-hole with becoming gravity; while those rejected were formed into a hasty bouquet to adorn the schoolroom.

We arrived home rather later than usual, and in the hall encountered Mrs. Chanter.

As we entered she had just left the library and was about to ascend the stairs. It did not require the cool distant tone of her 'Good afternoon' to assure me that, for some reason which at the moment I had not the common sense even to suspect, she had unmistakably parted with a portion of her usual, real or assumed, indifference to things in general. This fact, in itself, did not disturb me in the least; it never entering my mind for an instant, that *I*, personally, could be in any way connected with it.

Adopting the course to which I had lately accustomed myself when under more than usual excitement, I resolutely put away all reflection upon the occurrences of the afternoon until such a time as I should have leisure to think over them uninterruptedly. I made tea for the children and myself, and then told them two stories about boys and wild beasts, those being the subjects in which they took the most interest. (I remember I made the boys as mischievous as possible,

and put an extra tint of savageness on the wild animals, finding therein a certain relief to my feelings.) When this entertainment was ended I sent the little listeners to bed, with their nerves probably in the same excited state as my own. Sometimes I think that we take an unconscious pleasure in witnessing in others the development of similar passions to those which at the moment agitate ourselves. At all events I can recollect feeling rather pleased than otherwise upon noticing the terrified air with which my little friends retired, as though they fully expected to find some of the fierce creatures of my imagination in ambush in their bedroom.

Once fairly alone, I sat down to think. I buried my face in my hands to reflect on the part I had acted towards the only being in the house who had ever expressed any interest in me, and to decide in what measure I had erred.

But my mind seemed a blank. My head

was so confused that I could not think clearly. It seemed impossible for me to recall, except in the most uncertain and general way, the conversation of the afternoon. One thing still never entered my mind for a moment, and that was the possible effect on his sister's mind of my appearance on the road alone with Mr. Harrop, each of us perched upon a large stone, and apparently conversing amicably.

But my troubles were not yet over. The events of the day were not quite completed. My face was still buried in my hands when a knock at the door startled me.

'If you please, miss, here's a letter for you.'

I took it mechanically, and looked at it. The handwriting was unknown.

'Are you not well to-night, miss?'

'Yes, thank you. When did this letter come?'

'Just this moment, miss.'

'Just this moment?'

'Yes, miss, by the night post, you know. It's nearly ten o'clock. I brought it up directly in case it should get forgotten, like the one master made such a fuss about.'

'Oh, thank you,' I said.

She waited a moment, and then with a civil 'Good-night,' accompanied by a look of pity which both annoyed and touched me, went her way, and left me alone with my unexpected epistle.

I looked again at the handwriting. No. I did not know it. It was a peculiar hand, like that of a lawyer, or rather like that used for law deeds, and yet evidently disguised. I glanced at the post-mark. It must have been posted at our own little village office after 4 and before 7 o'clock that evening. I turned it over and examined it in every way, trying to guess who the writer could be, but in vain. At last I opened it, and read as follows :

'You will please to discontinue these

way-side meetings, and, in fact, all private communication with the man with whom I saw you this afternoon. I do not suspect anything as yet, but I know what women are. Give me the slightest ground for suspicion—*and leave the rest to me.* You had better never have lived than that I should, for one moment, doubt your truth to me.'

There was no date nor name to this letter, no clue but in my own mind to the identity of the writer; but it was none the less clear to me that it was that writer who was, even now, in a room below me, singing some gay light song, the notes of which as I sat thinking forced themselves on my ear. The letter dropped from my hands.

'It is best,' I said; 'I have acted for the best. I would not undo it if I could.'

Then I went through in detail the argument which had rushed through my mind the moment before I had uttered those deceitful words to Mr. Harrop—words which no

specious sophistry of my own could ever put before me as words of truth—words which, however to be regretted in the future, could never now be contradicted; for how could I go to this man, whom I loved so eagerly, and tell him how I had lied? I went through it in detail, and then I said to myself decidedly, 'Things must take their course.'

'It is safest,' said cowardice and fear. 'It is nothing to do with me,' said that base prompter, a selfish heart. 'You must never let the man you love know the deceit you have practised,' said again the perversion of the all-absorbing devotion, which, although I scarcely knew it, was the mainspring of all my actions.

And so things took their course.

CHAPTER XXIX.

It was the morning of Fanny Harrop's wedding, and a brighter or more beautiful morning never dawned upon the earth. Marion Launceston had returned only the previous evening, so the proposed pic-nic had never taken place. Like myself, my friend was to be present at the breakfast, but, unlike myself, was one of the party invited to witness the ceremony. Aura and Nellie were to be the only bridesmaids. This, I heard, was in accordance with the wishes of Mr. Graeme, who, exceeding I believe the privileges of a bridegroom, had expressed himself rather strongly on the subject. Had the bride had her way, the two attendant young ladies would no doubt have been multiplied by a dozen.

Immediately after an early breakfast, with the assistance of the nurse I attired the children in their pretty white dresses, and despatched them to their mamma's dressing-room for her approbation. This I concluded was graciously accorded, as I did not see their faces again till after their return from church. I heard the carriages drive off one after another, but did not go to the window to look at them. Instead of so doing, I secured my door to make sure against intrusion, unlocked my desk, took out the letter I had received a few days back, broke the seal I had placed on it, and read and re-read it.

'It is over now,' I said, 'and will trouble me no more. He is going, and possibly when he returns I shall be no longer here.' I had nursed myself into such a dread of his presence that anything, at the moment, seemed to me more endurable than the staying in a place where I should be likely to meet him at intervals. 'He shall trouble me no more,' I said.

And this note I held between my fingers. Should I destroy it? By a movement of my hand the deed would be done, and there would remain in the future nothing but my own knowledge to bring to my mind the strange occurrences of the past few weeks. Yes, I would destroy it. But something stayed my hand. With an impulse for which I could not account, and which seemed to me at the moment almost impossible to resist, I put it hastily into my desk, which I locked and double-locked.

'I will keep it,' I said. 'There is no harm in doing so, and who can tell of what use it may some day be to me! But of what use *can* it be?' I asked myself. And yet, obeying my impulse, I left it undestroyed.

Dismissing the subject at length from my mind, I rose, and commenced attiring myself for the festivities of the day, hurrying through my toilette in order to be ready to assist Mrs. Chanter in receiving the guests on their

return from church, according to instructions previously received. Upon making my appearance in the reception room, I soon found that the office deputed to me was on this special occasion no sinecure; my superior appearing to consider, as usual, that the correct method of welcoming her friends was to sit in an arm-chair and look handsome, until necessity compelled her to rise and preside at the refreshment department. Even when the bride herself entered, she might as well have been a stranger to her mother, for any interest that lady seemed to take in her appearance, presence, or fate generally.

The breakfast was all that a wedding breakfast should be—that is, every thing was done that hospitality and custom and fashion demanded on such an occasion; yet nothing gave me pleasure for a moment. Two circumstances, I remember, occupied my attention to the almost entire exclusion of everything else; they were the triumphant expression on the face of the bridegroom,

and the singular silence of Mr. Harrop. I felt mystified—as if there were an under-current that I could not fathom, though I fancied I ought to be able to do so. But time passed on—the speeches were over, the bride had left the table, and was now ready to start. The usually dreaded parting moment had arrived. The most important person in the assembly seemed perfectly calm and collected. She wished all her friends a gay farewell, and kissed her mother without a tear; Mrs. Chanter on her part appearing as if carved in granite. She may have been affected, but she certainly did not display any outward evidence of motherly feeling. Her daughter had already crossed the threshold, when she suddenly dropped her husband's arm and turned back.

'Good-bye, Uncle Charles, once more.'

I noticed, with astonishment, that the little fascinating affected air she had kept up so long was now dropped, and her face looked sad and earnest, though prettier in its

sadness and its quiet expression than I had ever seen it look before.

'Good-bye again, Uncle Charles.'

He appeared surprised, but stepped forward quickly as she spoke, and kissed her affectionately.

'Good-bye, my darling,' he said. 'God bless you!'

'Uncle Charles,' she said, suddenly bursting into tears. 'I have not been kind and good to you—not loving as I ought to have been—and you have been more than a father to me.'

'My dear little child,' he said, calmly, putting her light hair back from her forehead, as though she were really a child, 'you only think and say this because you are about to leave me. You must not let your imagination run away with you. You will be happier soon.'

'No,' she said; 'it isn't that. I've thought about it so lately—the last few days. I

meant to do it, but I can't. I can't go away without asking you to forgive me.'

'Fanny,' exclaimed Mrs. Chanter, 'I'm ashamed of you. Have you taken leave of your senses?'

'Uncle Charles,' she went on, without heeding or appearing to hear her mother's words, 'you do forgive me, don't you? Please say you do before I go.'

With a violent effort he answered her in the same calm tone as before.

'There has been little for me to forgive, Fanny, I think,' he said; 'but, in whatever manner you may have erred, do not doubt that all is already pardoned and forgotten.'

'Of course it is,' she answered, 'oh! of course it is!' She bent her head and kissed his hands repeatedly. He drew one away, placed his arm round her, and said a few words to her in a low tone.

'Yes,' she said; 'I will, I will. I hope God will forgive me, as well as you, Uncle Charles.'

'And bless you too, my child! Now, no more. Good-bye. Why, Willie's quite ashamed of you!'

He was not looking ashamed, but certainly very angry and annoyed.

'Why, everyone's ashamed, I should think, Fanny,' said Mrs. Chanter, with more energy than I had ever before known her to display. 'Everyone's ashamed of you. *I* am quite *surprised*!'

'Good-bye, mamma,' she answered meekly, turning towards her.

'Good-bye, my dear. I really wish this had not occurred. It appears to me most uncalled-for and unseemly. Good-bye.'

She turned again to Mr. Harrop, and kissed him hurriedly.

'Good-bye, my darling,' he said.

Then she took for the second time the arm of her husband, who looked disconcerted, to an almost inexcusable extent I thought, and went with him to the carriage. He, on his part, did not bid farewell to anyone,

merely raising his hat with a forced smile to the company generally, after he had entered the carriage. Then, with her last look lingering on her uncle, the bride was driven away. At that moment, I wondered how I could ever have thought her utterly heartless.

Then I thought, 'He is gone—God helping me, I will be far from here when he returns.'

For I felt firm in my lately-formed resolution that, come what might, I would resign my engagement with Mrs. Chanter, and seek some fresh home where I should be free from the chance of meeting him. A fresh home, where I could also learn to overcome the love, of which I knew I had cause to be ashamed, inasmuch as it had been given unwished-for and unsought. I felt firm in this resolution, and my firmness lasted two days. At the end of that time I began to waver, and before a week had passed I was equally firm in a fresh resolution to remain at 'The Laurels' whatever happened. Like a

moth fluttering round a candle, I could not forego the dangerous pleasure of occasionally seeing the face of the man I loved. Truly, though a woman myself, I cannot but endorse the generally received opinion that women are 'inexplicable creatures.'

CHAPTER XXX.

It was the evening of the day following the wedding, and I sat with Marion in her own little private room. She had, at last, fulfilled her promise of inducing Mrs. Chanter to part, for a time, with her governess. But the visit so long looked forward to—on my part—gave no promise of being a cheerful one. My friend had been gay enough the night before, the gayest in the room, now she was calm, and quiet, and serious. We had talked on a variety of subjects for some time; at least, the conversation had been, for the most part, a series of questions on my side, and monosyllabic or short answers on hers, when I began to feel so tired of the existing state of things, that I determined, if possible, to render them, in general, a little more interesting.

'Marion,' I said, plunging into my new subject, 'what's the matter with you to-night? I never saw you so dull. Do you disapprove of the proceedings yesterday?'

'Disapprove of them?' she said quickly. 'Why?'

'Why, because you have never said a word about them ever since I have been here, and, you seem so unlike yourself. You are so still and quiet.'

'Everyone must be quiet sometimes, Mary.'

'Yes, quiet, but not sad. It seems to me that you should be always gay and happy. You have everything to make you so.'

'It is often the case,' she answered, smiling, 'that when people are supposed to be in the enviable position in which your imagination places me, there is still one thing they want to make them really happy, and that is the one to which other eyes are blind, but which fills theirs to the exclusion of all else.'

'And is this the case with you, Marion?'

'I did not say so.'

'But it is so?'

'No! There you mistake, Mary. It is not so.' She laughed as she spoke.

'Then what makes you so dull, and unlike yourself? Why, even Mrs. Chanter who has lost her daughter seems as happy and cheerful as usual.'

'And I, I suppose, who have lost nothing, appear as though I had lost all?'

'I did not say so,' I answered, retorting upon her.

'No, and had you said so you would have been again wrong. Poor Fanny! I was thinking of her, Mary, when you first said how dull I was.'

'Why do you call her "poor"?' I asked.

'For many reasons. Do you know that in spite of the almost convincing degree in which appearances were formerly against her, one thing is now evident to me, and that is that she is not, after all, entirely heartless.'

'No,' I said; 'she certainly is not. In

spite of her natural thoughtlessness and selfishness, she was touched at the last with some sort of love, however transient, for her uncle. But [it is not to be wondered at, Marion. Everybody loves that man.'

'You're wrong there,' she said, laughing. 'Everyone doesn't, for I do not.'

'*You* do not, Marion?'

'Certainly not. Not in any signification of the word, except the broad love which we are all virtuously credited with feeling for our fellow-creatures. I certainly love him in no other way. Why, you look surprised! Did you imagine he had inspired me with the *grande passion*?'

'I did think you—you thought a great deal of him.'

'In the style in which Fanny is supposed to think of Mr. Graeme?'

'Yes,' I said, laughing in spite of myself at her comical face; 'something in that style.'

'Undeceive yourself at once then, madam. It is not so.' Knowing the truthfulness of

her nature, I felt immediately how impossible it was to doubt her, and, as I felt this, a portion of my castle of despair crumbled into ruins. The feeling of relief made me bold.

'I can't think,' I said, 'how people can help loving him. I can't think how people can help seeing how good and generous he is.'

'No,' she said, quietly, 'I suppose you can't. It's the *grande passion* that makes us blind. Mary, I begin to think you're one of its victims.' She smiled as she spoke, and I knew that she was not in earnest; but the words themselves, though spoken in jest, alarmed me, and I resolved to avoid the subject for the future.

'It is no wonder *you* feel an attachment for him,' she went on after a pause, 'for in your time of need he was your only friend, and so merits your affection and gratitude. By the way, Mary,' she added suddenly, 'where is that paper of Mr. Graeme's? Have you brought it with you?'

'No,' I answered, with a quick thought of the dreadful paragraph it contained, which had lately been less in my mind—'it's at home.'

'Oh! I'm sorry, I wanted to read it.'

'Did he—Mr. Graeme—ask you about it?'

'Yes. He asked me if I'd read it, and I said I had as yet had no opportunity of doing so, but I didn't tell him I had lent it to you. He seemed vexed about it.'

'What, that you had not read it?'

'I don't know; I couldn't understand him. His face darkened when I answered him as though he were angry and puzzled. I laughed at him, and asked him if anything very special depended upon my making myself conversant with its contents. But he looked as disturbed as ever, and turned away without a reply.'

'What a strange man he is!'

'So you said once before,' she exclaimed quickly. 'Mary, you are prejudiced against him.'

'Not at all. But why should he be put out simply because you neglected to read his silly paper?'

'I don't know that he was put out—at least by that fact itself. Perhaps he was thinking of something else at the moment, and his angry look had no connection with the paper. You are prejudiced against him, Mary, like your friend, Mr. Harrop. Has he been discussing him with you?'

My only resource was to prevaricate. 'Is *he* prejudiced against him? What should make you think so?'

'Certainly he is,' she answered, for once off her guard, or, probably, not imagining I could be guilty of a *ruse* of any kind; 'certainly he is, I thought everyone must see that. He never scrupled to show his dislike to Mr. Graeme. I should have thought you *must* have known *that*, Mary.'

'I did know it, partly,' I answered, ashamed of my little bit of cunning. 'I was aware, latterly, that he did not approve of

the marriage, but I scarcely knew that he was "prejudiced," as you call it, against Mr. Graeme. To tell you the truth, I thought him too just and honourable to be capable of prejudice against anyone.'

'But it certainly *is* prejudice,' she said. 'He has no just cause for mistrusting him.'

'Mistrusting him, Marion? In what way does he mistrust him?'

'Well,' she said, 'that's a difficult question to answer. But he does mistrust him. To use another expression, he has no faith in him. He never from the first liked him personally, that is to say, as an associate. And possibly—though he is doubtless himself unaware of it, even if it is so—that fact had originally as much to do with his opposition to the marriage as anything else.'

'Did he actually oppose the marriage?'

'Certainly he did. He wouldn't hear of it at all at first. You appear to live out of the world, Mary.'

'I hear nothing,' I said; 'at least nothing of what is going on around me. How can I, shut up and isolated as I am?'

'Poor girl! I forgot. Well, I'll tell you the story. It's quite a little history; short but full of interest. I think you must have gleaned morsels of it by the way?'

'I have not, indeed.'

'Well then, to begin. You must know, then, that on the return of papa and myself from the Continent, we settled down here for a time to be near Mr. Harrop, as papa took great pleasure in his society.'

'Yes.'

'Well, about three weeks after this settling down, Fanny comes back from Paris, fresh from school, young, pretty, and anxious to get married—the latter is generally bound up with the two former, you know.'

'Generally, but not always,' I put in. 'Don't keep stopping, Marion.'

'Well, another three weeks elapse, and

Mr. Graeme appears upon the scene—handsome, clever, brilliant, and also young.'

She stopped again, but I made no remark, and with a comical toss of her head, she continued.

'Well, he meets Fanny, and the natural sequence to such an event speedily takes place. These two young and good-looking people fall in love with each other, and ask permission to get married. Then the question arises—who is this Mr. Graeme? Nobody answers. Nobody *can* answer. Nobody knows. He had been introduced to Mr. Harrop by a gentleman who, on his part, had met him at an hotel where both happened to be boarding at one time. He had introduced himself to this gentleman as "Mr. William Graeme;" and the acquaintance thus casually commenced had resulted in an intimacy which finally culminated in his production at "The Laurels." Mr. Harrop's friend, who soon after Mr. Graeme's appearance here sailed for New

Zealand, had, when questioned respecting the antecedents of his young acquaintance, emphatically stated that he knew nothing whatever about him—with the exception of the rather vague account which he had, at various times, given of himself and his doings. Further application in this quarter would, therefore, be necessarily useless. But something must be done. Enquiry must be made. Who is this Mr. Graeme? Even Mamma feels anxious. Everything is so eminently unsatisfactory. This young man had certainly made good his footing at "The Laurels" to an almost unparalleled extent, but now he must either explain himself, or be expelled. Mrs. Chanter, following the approved steps of other British matrons, had admitted a young, handsome, thoughtless, and, for all she knew, a reckless and unprincipled young man, into her maternal nest, and allowed him to associate on terms of equality, and eventually of great intimacy, with her daughter; but now he asks

the hand of that daughter in marriage, and retrograde steps must be taken. The young man's past conduct, his position, and prospects must be ascertained. This was Mr. Harrop's version of the general aspect of affairs, on his return from Ireland, and finding Mr. Graeme, who, when he left home, was a mere casual acquaintance of his family, aiming at the position of nephew-in-law to himself. He told his sister, in that cool manner of his, that she was, on no account, to make herself uneasy about the existing state of things, as all danger resulting from her imprudent conduct was already past; because, he said, if Mr. Graeme were a needy adventurer and wanted Fanny for her fortune—he had arrived home in time to prevent the sacrifice of both; while, if he should prove, as he represented himself to be, a rich and honourable man, with nothing to do for the moment but amuse himself, the proof that there was no probability of Fanny's feelings being trifled with, was that he had

asked her hand in marriage. Rather plain, was it not ?'

'Particularly so, I think.'

'But that was not all. He also expressed his opinion at the same time, that no man should be permitted to associate on familiar terms with any respectable family, unless the head of the household were thoroughly satisfied as to his character and morals. This, more particularly,' he added, 'when there were young girls in the house, and most particularly when they had had the misfortune to have a French education!'

'Did he say that to Mrs. Chanter ?'

'Yes; and probably other stronger, and even—to her at least—unpalatable truths. Well, retrograde steps, as, much to his sister's annoyance, he persisted in calling them, were taken immediately, he being the one to act in the matter. Private interviews took place. Mr. Graeme was questioned. Mr. Graeme answered. Mr. Graeme's answers were, as far as they went, satisfactory. Mr. Harrop

signified his consent to such an arrangement, and the engagement of the young people "stood over," as Mr. Graeme expressed it, until such time as proofs should arrive, confirmatory or contradictory, of that gentleman's statements.'

'What were those statements, Marion?' I asked, anxious to learn as much as I could about him.

'That will come out in due time. You must listen and wait. Mr. Graeme having to send to Australia for his "proofs," a great deal of time was necessarily allowed to the before-mentioned state of "standing over," and during that time the expected proof-producer had succeeded in gaining such an influence over Fanny (Mr. Harrop not considering it just to prevent the, of course, restricted intercourse of the lovers)—that I doubt not, had his account of himself turned out to be a tissue of falsehoods from one end to the other, she would still have been contented to have presented him with her

fortune, provided he would have taken her hand into the bargain. However, at last, the proofs arrived in the shape of a letter from an eminent merchant in Sydney, who informed Mr. Harrop, in a letter enclosed in one addressed to Mr. Graeme, that in reply to his enquiries, he begged to state his young friend Mr. William Graeme had for several years held an appointment in his establishment, and so unexceptionable were his character and abilities, that previous to his departure to England for a year, for the benefit of his health, which had for some time been in a weakly state, he had engaged to receive him again upon his return, and advance him to the position of general manager, at a salary of one thousand pounds per annum. He trusted that his information would prove satisfactory to Mr. Harrop. Coupled with other details, which seemed to leave no room for doubt of the *bonâ-fide* nature of the communication, this information *did* prove satisfactory to Mr. Har-

rop. At least, he acted as if it did. The engagement was released from its position of "standing over," and permitted to take steps towards developing itself into a marriage. Mr. Harrop's restrained manner towards Mr. Graeme was altered at once for one more friendly and confidential—though still it was not, perfectly, either the one or the other—and I firmly believe that, even then, could he have forbidden the marriage without causing unhappiness to his niece, he would have done so without scruple.'

'*I* should have interdicted his visits during the "standing over" time.'

'Something was said about this, I believe; though by whom I know not. Certainly not by Mrs. Chanter; for it was her opinion that, should either Fanny or Mr. Graeme consider they were ill-treated in the matter, they would, no doubt, eventually make up their minds to marry, in spite of any circumstances—Fanny especially; and even *she* did not wish them to be united

till the gentleman had proved his respectability. Possibly, Mr. Harrop's ideas on the subject were similar—though he simply, as I said before, laid stress on what he termed "the injustice" of interdicting their meeting after his niece had once been permitted to associate so unrestrictedly with her new friend, and appeared so attached to him.'

'Was she so much attached to him?'

'Apparently so, and we can only judge by outward conduct in such cases.'

'Well?'

'Well, immediately after the arrival of the "proofs," the marriage was fixed to take place in about a month's time. Mr. Harrop *allowed* it, but would not forward the arrangements in any way. He did not attempt to prevent things taking their course, but he would have nothing to do with that course. And so they were married—and so the story ends.'

'And so the story ends?'

'Yes, and I'm sorry it's not longer, as you appear so interested in it.'

'Where are they gone now?' I asked, after a pause.

'Where are they gone now?' she repeated, opening her large eyes. 'Don't you know even that?'

'No. Didn't I tell you that I hear nothing? There's some more of the story, you see.'

'I do see. Well, I must inform you, they are now gone up the Rhine on their wedding-tour, and are supposed to be bound from thence to "The Laurels," preparatory to setting off for New Zealand. Fanny's outfit is now being prepared, and I've no doubt she is at present contemplating thrilling the hearts of the aborigines with wonder and admiration. How surprised you look!'

'Of course I do. I knew nothing of all this.'

'So I should suppose from the expression of your face. However, you know it

now, and there's not so much to know, after all. I dare say you could have learned as much from the children, had you taken the trouble to ask.'

'Yes, no doubt. But, Marion, tell me this: Why does Mr. Harrop mistrust him?'

'Who? Mr. Graeme? How can I tell? There is apparently no reason for his doing so; and yet,' she added, thoughtfully, 'it struck me yesterday morning, that he was even more reserved, and unwilling to signify approbation of the affair than he had ever been before. He rallied towards the end of the breakfast, and——'

'Yes,' I interrupted; 'at the last he seemed resigned.'

'Yes,' "resigned," that's the word. But, as you say, it was not till the last; not till things were totally irremediable that he appeared even that; and I think that even the expression of resignation was forced, in order not to pain his niece when he was so near parting from her.

'She seemed to feel the separation from him more than from her mother.'

'Naturally so. Beyond the instinct that attracts a child to its parent, Fanny has no affection for Mrs. Chanter. I remember when she was at the College, just at the commencement of one of the terms, she saw one of the juniors crying very bitterly, and upon the child replying to her enquiries that she was fretting because she should not see her mother till the holidays came again, Fanny told her, very roughly, that she was a little idiot, and that as for herself, if she was *never* going to see her mother again, she shouldn't make such a jolly fuss about it as that. Fanny's expressions, if you remember, were usually more emphatic than elegant at that period of her existence. Certainly Mrs. Chanter is not a woman to inspire affection, whereas Mr. Harrop is one of those men whom it is impossible——'

'Not to love,' I suggested, laughing, with

a pleasant recollection of her former words on the s ubject.

'That's not the expression,' she said, quietly; 'I mean whom it is impossible not to admire, respect, and esteem. And men of that class are almost invariably nearly idolised by their relations and dependents.'

'Yes,' I said; 'even Mrs. Chanter evinces for him an affection which she never displays for anyone except that abominable little Edward.'

'Yes, and even Mary Browne delights in talking of him.

'Oh, Marion!'

'It's perfectly natural, I know. Were I in your place I should never forget the kindness he had shown me. For he has been very good to you, Mary.'

'Yes,' I said; 'I can never think of him but with gratitude and affection.'

She made no answer to this, and the conversation gradually diverged to other topics. No further allusion was made to the

subjects we had previously discussed. Not once again was Mr. Harrop's name mentioned.

'But is it not enough,' I said to myself, 'that she says she does not love him?' This being the case, she will, of course, never marry him—then who can tell the future?' I had read in books that a disappointed man often marries a woman the exact antipodes of the one he vainly loved. What could be more opposite than Marion's nature and my own? Who should say that, allowing he now loved my friend, in the end he would not turn to me? Who should say that some day in the patient distance, my heart should not be at rest? The one great passion of my life was as a giant rock in front of my eyes, blinding me to all but itself. 'Who can tell,' said this poor blindness, 'that in the long future I may not reach the desired haven?'

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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